

秋月アスカ

イラスト  
岸田メル

# 道果ての 向こうの光



イースト・プレス

# **Light Beyond**

— Michi Hate No Mukou No Hikari —

**- Volume 1 -**

**The Light Beyond the Road's End**

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## - STORY -

“-Just what kind of pretence is that. Is this some new form of torment?”

Yuna, a plain village girl, suddenly lost her plain day to day life. After being requested to by a mysterious light in a bright white world, Yuna finds herself in the body of a beautiful saint. However, what awaited her there was; the contemptuous gaze of the saint's fiance, First Holy Knight Asyut; the cold detachment from her attendants; and the tense atmosphere of the entire palace. Yuna, alone in her crippling confusion, still tries to fulfill her duty as the saint's substitute, until one night when she discovers the saint's sins beyond the spiral staircase...!?

# Prologue

The road upon which humans walk has always been short-lived.

No matter the amount of splendor amassed by the rich.

No matter the depth of envy incited by the beautiful.

No matter the level of faith collected by a servant of God.

As long as they were human, death visited them all the same.

Thus, what befell one girl that day, was nothing removed from the norm.

She simply found herself at her inevitable destination, no more, no less.

But the masses would lament. For a girl so young, death was too sudden and cruel.

*“But you won’t stop moving forward, will you. As long as the flickering light beyond the road’s end is within sight.”*

# Chapter One

Yuna's ordinary life was stolen in an instant.

On that day, Yuna was walking on the main paved road, just as she had many days before. She was making her way to the herb market, looking fondly at the many shops lining the street. Shopkeepers acquainted with her greeted her warmly as she passed by, which she returned with a wave of her hand. And just as she rounded the corner, with her slow measured steps.

Something happened to her body.

Thinking back, the details rose to the surface with frightful clarity: the piercing scream of a young woman, the wet breathing and high-pitched neigh of the horse, who realized far too late, and a large horse carriage filling her entire vision.

And the last thing she saw was the wide eyes of the coachman...

— I was run over and killed by a carriage.

Yuna reached that conclusion faintly.

And now she found herself standing alone in an unfamiliar, white world.

She finally remembered everything just moments ago. Until then, she had been spacing out, unable to process what had transpired for quite a long time. Her memories took time to slowly emerge from the white nothingness of her head, much like her surroundings, to piece together the truth. And the truth that she found was "death", a ruthless conclusion.

It was quite a short life, she thought. She had only lived to be eighteen. So many things undone – there were probably less things she had accomplished than those she hadn't. It wasn't as if she lived with the goal of accomplishing something great, but still she felt like there was more she had wanted to do.

(I wonder if that is the reason I came to this strange place. I have some half-felt regrets, and unfinished feelings... and maybe that's why I can't move on to the afterlife.)

Yuna did a circle to take in her surroundings one more time.

—And the world was still as empty as it had been. Unflatteringly white, with no sense of direction or dimension. Yuna was completely alone in a completely white world.

(Ahh... What should I do?)

She couldn't even tell where she should focus her viewpoint. She had simply been staring blankly ahead, though doing that showed no signs of helping to remedy the situation.

(What is going on? Could this be the afterlife? What they call Heaven? This is completely different from what I was taught though... I don't know what I should do all alone by myself. I ended up in this utterly unknown place because I died. Actually, was there a particular reason I had to die? Even though I lived ordinarily... Why? In my short life, did I somehow amass karma deep enough to result in my death, O' God—)

Yuna began to grow more and more confused. Covering her mouth with her quivering right hand, she looked around her surroundings restlessly.

(Someone, anyone!)

Then, finally, as if someone heard her wish, her eyes caught a dark shadow far away.

Quite a distance away was a lone figure.

Had the figure been there all along?... No, it had to have appeared just now. There was no way one could miss a dark figure in a world so brilliantly white.

Nevertheless, there was a person. Yuna was not alone. Perhaps this person was just as confused as Yuna. When she thought that, she felt immediately at ease. Yuna's feet kicked at the white space as she made to walk.

"Excuse me!"

Yuna panted as she sprinted to the figure; the figure became clearer and clearer as the distance closed. It was a woman looking down, covered in a loose dress which hung on her thin frame, and her hair was hanging down covering her expression. Her pale arms gave off the impression that she was still young.

“Um... h-hello.”

Yuna called to the girl, stopping a few paces away. She wasn't sure how to start a conversation though. In a situation like this, even a “hello” would feel a bit odd.

“I'm sorry. I found myself here when I came to. How about you?”

The figure showed absolutely no reaction. Yuna felt a little discouraged by this, but pushed on.

...Yet the figure appeared unaffected.

“Um. I do apologize for speaking to you out of the blue—”

“—ou.”

“Huh?”

The woman's mouth definitely opened, but the voice came out in a thick croak and so was hard to hear. Yuna took a step closer and brought her ear closer.

“I despise you.”

Yuna was struck dumb for a moment. She couldn't understand the girl's words. But as a few moments passed and Yuna began to grasp what she had been told, a blinding light suddenly enveloped the girl and collapsed from within to form grains of light.

Yuna couldn't move a single muscle. She couldn't comprehend what just happened. And, as her eyes were wide with surprise, the grains of light danced about the air and then disappeared from sight.

But that was not all.

The disappearing lights once again returned, recovering their brightness, and floated gently above Yuna's head.

There were several of these faint grains of light. By no means were they a strong light, and even now they were fleeting and seemed like they would disappear at any moment.

“W-What? What is this?”

Yuna unconsciously took a step back, but there was no place to run or hide in this empty space.

*“Yuna. The poor soul of a young girl ran over by a carriage.”*

All of a sudden a voice reverberated through the area.

A strange voice that could not be distinguished as male or female. Yuna held her breath.

*“We are the ones who took your wandering soul to this place.”*

“W-Who are you? Where are you?”

*“We are beings who no longer have a name, and we are here beside you.”*

“What does that mean? I don’t understand anything!”

*“Calm. Please calm yourself and listen. There is no time.”*

Yuna, who had become teary-eyed, somehow kept her silence and looked at the ball of light floating in the air. Right now, it seemed like there was only this ball of light to rely on.

*“This place is neither heaven nor hell. It is a place of nothingness. We called you here to ask you to lend us your strength.”*

Lend... her strength? She, who was already dead? Yuna frowned uncertainly.

*“Yuna, do you know of Saint Celiastina?”*

“Saint... Celiastina?”

*“Yes. Revered in your world, sent by the God, Vida, to be his voice. These daughters with his symbol on their necks are worshipped for generations.”*

Yuna nodded while being confused. There wasn’t a single person who wouldn’t know of that name.



“Of course I know. The current saint is Lady Celiastina. No matter what kind of town in the countryside, that is common knowledge that everyone is aware of.”

*“Then you must know of the saints’ duties. For generations, it is customary for the saints to marry the First Holy Knight, determined by the country, and the two serve the country through their life.”*

Yuna nodded again. This was also common knowledge throughout the country. What she didn’t understand was how this had anything to do with her right now.

*“That very Saint Celiastina–”*

She felt like their voice was suddenly tinged with sorrow.

*“Attempted to drown herself.”*

“– WHAT?”

Yuna was so surprised she lost her voice. The saint, a being that was closer to God than anyone else, committed suicide! It was such a shocking event. She had never heard of such a thing happening in the past.

“A-And?”

*“Unfortunately, there is no one who knows of her present deed. Naturally, right now the light of her life is about to disappear.”*

“T-That can’t be!”

*“But we cannot let this pass. It is likely that a successor will not appear for a saint who has taken her own life. If that happens then various calamities will befall the world. We cannot cast aside her life like this.”*

In other words, Celiastina being dead was a troubling thing. But of course, for a saint to do something like commit suicide, it was an unprecedented action.

*“Therefore, we spent our powers, and bound Celiastina’s life. However, we cannot so easily manipulate the life and death of people. It is extremely difficult to establish a soul into a body that it has detached from. It will take quite some time for Celiastina to awaken once more. But the body, which has become an empty shell, will rot before then.”*

*And so, Yuna, we require your strength."*

"Uh, m-me?"

Suddenly being addressed, Yuna gazed at them in stupefaction. She couldn't even imagine how she was involved in the current topic.

*"Yuna. While Celiastina's soul is sleeping, we would ask of you to enter her body and live as a substitute."*

.....

.....

"Wha... WHAAAAAT!?"

*"We cannot leave that soulless body as it is. However, we also cannot return her soul to her body immediately. As we stated before, she requires time."*

She understood the reason. There were also feelings of confusion but she decided to leave it as if she understood. But still, why did she have to bear such an important duty? She just couldn't comprehend that one point.

*"We might even be able to call this a miracle."*

Miracle?

*"The moment that Celiastina suicided and the moment that you were hit by the carriage, was a perfect sign whereby a type of distortion occurred. Because of that, it was possible to connect your soul and Celiastina's body. Although, our powers can only keep your soul in place for a year."*

"P-Please wait! This is absolutely impossible! You're telling me to be the saint?"

*"Yes, that is right. As Saint Celiastina; please sleep, wake, eat, laugh, be furious, feel sorrow, and feel joy."*

"But I'm just a commoner! I'm not fit to be the messenger of God!"

*"The messenger of God is nothing but an image that humans have created. The real*

*saints are frail humans who barely have powers. There should be no differences between them and other humans."*

"T-That's not the problem! To us commoners, the saint is someone above the clouds and someone we would never be able to meet in our lifetime. By no means is someone like me..."

*"Yuna, please we beseech you. No one but you can do this. Please do not abandon Celiastina."*

"T-That's..."

Those words were unfair. But, vaguely, she began to understand that she wasn't in a position to refuse. From the start, she was someone who had died. No matter what kind of world awaited her after death, she couldn't complain. It seemed like there was nothing to do but resign and accept this. In that case...

*"You will undertake this, correct?"*

"....."

It wasn't a question.

*"We do not know how long it will take. At most, it will be one year. Until then, we entrust this in your care."*

Leave it to me, was something she couldn't say. She was still grasping for composure. But the fact that she couldn't refuse weighed heavily in Yuna's chest.

*"Ah, our time is up. Yuna, please do not forget. We will always be watching over you."*

"Wait. Why are you all concerned with Celiastina... Who are you? Are you... God?"

The floating light flickered as if it would disappear even now.

*"No, we are not God. We are—"*

Before hearing their answer, Yuna's body was suddenly engulfed in a dazzling light. It was so brilliant that she couldn't see anything. Her consciousness faded away from that white world.

Wait, wait.

Her voice didn't reach anyone– suddenly, Yuna's world became black.

## Chapter Two

There was a murmuring, pleasant sensation.

It was a little cold, but its gentle and soft caresses against Yuna's body put her at ease.

"...nngh..."

Yuna slowly opened her heavy eyes and raised her head a little.

Her eyes were still out of focus but faintly, in her vision, she could see a rock face? Come to think of it, she could also feel a rough and rugged sensation against her body.

Where was she right now? What was she doing?

Little by little, her awareness came to her and Yuna slowly raised her upper body— her body was very heavy. But even still, she somehow twists her body and looks around the area. It seems that she is at the edge of a river.

Most of her body is submerged in water and only her upper body is leaning against the moss-covered stones of the riverside. She must have lost consciousness like this. Because she had been in the water for some time, her hands and feet were chilled.

There was a thick forest in this area and in between the gaps of the tall trees, a black night sky spread. And, as if shying away from the painted black sky, the stars twinkled here and there, and the moon could not be seen.

Yuna gathered up her white one-piece dress, heavy with water, and crawled out from the river.

"Where is... this place."

Muttering that, Yuna became anxious.

A small river in the middle of the forest. At this vague realization, she also realized that she didn't have the slightest idea as to why she was here or what she was doing here. Did she come here on a walk? However, surrounded by steep slopes and exposed rock,

this place doesn't appear suitable for a walk.

So then, why was she—.

She— her... Her?

Suddenly, Yuna looked up.

She just remembered something. A very important something.

“That’s right... that’s right, I... died!”

And, on top of that, she became a substitute for a complete stranger with a stranger who also died, all because of a brief moment... No, it wasn’t forced onto her. The events in that white world gradually came back to her.

“I’m not— Yuna anymore.”

Mumbling this, Yuna was shocked. She spread both her hands, numbed with cold, and took a long hard look at them. But they were the hands of a young girl around the same age as her, and she couldn’t see a difference between now and then. Even more so in this darkness. In this night, without a moon, she couldn’t even check her face in the water’s reflection. She lowered her hands, giving up on them, but then felt like she touched a small lump. Reflexively, she pulled her hand away and glanced down. There was a black lump stuck onto the one-piece dress she was wearing, and she happened to see it crawl, rustling, across the fabric.

“Ahh!”

Yuna brushed it away at once with her hand. Looking closely at the lump that tumbled down onto the ground, it was a poisonous insect. It was said that some have even lost their lives if they were bitten. Becoming scared, Yuna forced her heavy body to move and stood up to leave the edge of the river, running away from the poisonous insect. The stones tripped up her feet and she nearly fell many times. However, there was no one to support her.

(I don’t want to be in this place. I want to hurry and leave. At any rate, I want to meet someone.)

Yes, first she had to somehow make her way to a village. What had become of her, why

did Celiastina choose this place as her last moments, and what she knew or what she should do– all of these were out of the question until she found someone first.

“What do I do? Is this place a brook or something?”

If that was the case, then if she climbed up the forest slope there might be a boardwalk. And if she walked alongside that then it should become a road. On another note, she hadn’t been expecting that she would end up with this hard work upon her return to life; but nothing would happen if she complained about that now. Yuna approached the slope and tested the solidity of the soil. The slope itself was gentle and the ground wasn’t too soft. It seemed possible to climb if she grabbed onto the tree trunks and weeds as she went up.

(Here we go!)

Motivating herself, Yuna reached out to the first weed that would be the beginning– at that moment.

She heard the neigh of a horse in the distance. Following it, the faint sound of a man’s voice. At first, she couldn’t hear what was being said, but as she strained her ears she could hear that he was calling out the name of the saint– It was a person who was searching for her!

But the horse’s footsteps and the voice repeatedly came closer and went farther, it didn’t seem like they were approaching her. At this rate, they might leave without noticing her. Upon realizing that, Yuna raised her voice without hesitation; it was a voice louder than she had ever made, including the moment before she had been run over by the carriage.

“I’m over here–!! Help me–!!”

...Was it no good? The wall of dirt in front of her seemed to suck in her voice, making it so that it wouldn’t be heard very far.

“Please, notice me–!! SOMEONE–!!”

As Yuna continued to shout she, unconsciously, began to give into despair until somehow it seemed like the other person noticed her. The sound of a horse galloping over suddenly became quite distinct to her ears.

“I-I’m over here! Please, notice me!”

“–Lady Celiastina!?”

This time she could clearly hear the voice. That low, pleasant voice was strained right now but even still, to Yuna, it felt like a mercy filled blessing from God.

Suddenly, a man on horseback appeared at the top of the slope. In the darkness she could only see him as a large shadow, but it looked like he noticed her.

“Being in a place like that... please, wait for me!”

The owner of the voice said that sharply and nimbly jumped off the horse to descend the slope quickly. From the way he carried himself, she could tell that he received training.

In the blink of an eye he arrived at Yuna’s side and grabbed her firmly by the shoulders, pulling her in closer.

“Are you well!?”

“Y... yes.”

The man looked straight at her with extremely serious eyes. Jet black eyes. They were sharp with a core that could not be shaken by anyone. To the extent that Yuna instinctively felt frightened.

In a moment, the man looked Yuna up and down, ascertaining whether or not she had any large injuries. He exhaled quietly, but upon noticing how her entire body was soaked and covered in mud, his brows furrowed greatly.

Yuna, being herself, took a long hard look at the man as well. His hair, as black as his eyes, was short and tidy, and he was a young man with a straight nose and graceful features. From his finely embroidered and detailed tunic, she didn’t think that he was a commoner. More importantly, if she had met him in a village she would have unconsciously backed away from the aristocratic atmosphere that was wrapped around his body. It seemed like he was someone of status.

“Are you unharmed?”



“Y-Yes. I’m... okay.”

“Nevertheless, let us return to the royal palace as soon as possible. Please hold on to me.”

Saying that, the man suddenly lifted Yuna up into his arms and ascended the slope as smoothly as when he had come down. It was so quick that Yuna could do nothing but clutch on to him pitifully and desperately.



The man put Yuna on top of the waiting horse. Following that, he jumped up behind her and forced the horse into a run. Watching this series of actions, Yuna noticed that he seemed to be angry.

(T-That's natural, I guess. It looks like he was searching for the saint who went missing. Not only is there worry, but also anger, right?).

"...It is said that you went into the forest alone, without attendants."

As she thought, the man murmured this in a voice comprised of anger. His voice was also accompanied by such a cold ring that Yuna trembled in surprise.

"And that, even when night fell, you did not return. Do you know how much everyone worried?"

She felt ashamed as he said that. For Yuna, this was blame for something she had absolutely no recollection of, but right now she was definitely Celiastina and so she silently resigned herself to accepting his words.

"Please, never again, do such a thing. I sincerely beseech you."

Sorry, Yuna mumbled in a very thin voice. However, her mumble seemed to disappear into the wind as the horse ran. In that case she at least had to tell him this; Yuna clumsily twisted her body around to look up at the young man behind her who was holding the reigns.

"...Um, thank you very much for coming all the way here to find me. I'm very grateful."

Whereupon his eyes widened slightly, as if in surprise, and then suddenly his face twisted, a smile full of sarcasm appearing.

"– Just what kind of pretence is that. Is this some new form of torment?"

This time it was Yuna who stiffened and could do nothing but take in the gaze of the young man, who looked down on her.

When they reached the gates of the royal palace, the area was noisy.

The expression on everyone's face was of exhaustion. There was irritation, eyes wavering with anxiety, and people walking here and there. People who were of high status, people who were of no status, everyone was clearly tired.

In the midst of all of this, two youths returned on horseback. Everyone's reaction when they saw those two was intense, relieved sighs mixed with joyful shouts and there were even those who cried when the tension was cut. Yuna faltered at this reception; she hadn't expected that the saint's disappearance would create such a large chaos. She could feel vividly how important the existence of the saint was. But it certainly was a serious affair in the country if the saint disappeared. On top of that, if she had actually been dead... it was scary to imagine the chaos then.

One shadow walked calmly to Yuna who borrowed the young man's hand to get off the horse. Yuna, who was concerned about the muddy and heavy hem of her one-piece dress, suddenly noticed the shadow and raised her head.

It was a young woman. Her body was covered in a deeply-colored robe. Yuna couldn't see it clearly because of the dark, but it looked purple? Much like the black-haired young man who stood beside her, this woman had an overwhelming presence that a servant couldn't possibly have. Moreover, she had distinct and exceedingly beautiful features. However, there was also a characteristic inapproachable atmosphere around her.

"It appears that both of you are unharmed."

The woman said in a monotonous voice. The words were directed to the young man beside Yuna, but the woman's cold gaze rested on her.

"Yes. Thank you for your concern, Sister Yodel."

Except the woman, called Yodel by the black-haired man, was calm to the point where one wouldn't even think she had been worried.

"Lady Celiastina."

Being called out to by that woman, Yodel, made Yuna straighten her back in sudden

nervousness. Of course this is what she would be called but, even though she knew that, there was an unspeakable sense of discomfort.

“Y-Yes?”

“Do you realize how much time everyone has lost for your sake? Everyone postponed their work to search for you. For what reason did you leave? If it is not a reason that can be understood, then everyone here will be unable to withdraw quietly.”

“T-That is, um...”

Yuna was lost. There was no way she could talk about the reason. If she said that she went into the forest to search for a place to commit suicide, the resulting chaos would be impossible to recover from. And, firstly, she herself would like to ask why the saint ended her own life.

Yodel’s brow furrowed and she glared at Yuna who couldn’t string her words properly. Yuna unintentionally dropped her eyes, becoming scared. However, at the same time, she could feel an anger boiling up inside of her. A cold anger. Noticing this, Yuna became even more flustered– what was this feeling.

(These aren’t... my feelings.)

Of course she knew the feeling of anger. It wouldn’t be strange to feel that towards Yodel who was staring at her with obvious hostility, but for some reason she couldn’t think of this as her own feelings. It was like her heart had become disconnected. This unknown part of her, right now, was angry at Yodel.

“Sister Yodel, this conversation can be done tomorrow. Let us all retire for today.”

The young man concluded their conversation in place of Yuna, who had remained silent. And it didn’t seem like Yodel was going to push the issue any more than that.

“Everyone, Saint Celiastina has returned safely. She appears to be exhausted but otherwise unharmed. Return to your stations and resume your duties. A messenger is to be sent promptly with orders for the search parties to return. That is all.”

The young man said this in a voice that carried and before long the chaos was calmed down. It seemed like he was a person of great authority since no one interjected and, as ordered, they dispersed and returned to their stations. Even though there must

have been many questions they wanted to ask like where the saint went and why her appearance was so dirty, but not a single person voiced this. While admiring this, Yuna was taken deeper into the gates by the hand, past a row of bright flaming torches, and entrusted to the maids waiting at the entrance of the palace. The young man, who hadn't told her his name, – though this was reasonable since it wasn't his first time meeting her – glanced curtly at Yuna and took his leave with these few words, "Excuse me".

(W... what was that?)

Yuna sighed, suddenly feeling tired.

It might have been due to being thrown into a world she didn't understand, but it was also because of the harsh attitude from the young man and Yodel. Their attitude pierced Yuna. It doesn't look like they were just angry because of Celiastina disappearing on her own. She felt something more than that, something like hatred. For a second that young man, in the brook, had looked straight at her with those eyes. But then after that he only sent her looks distorted with contempt.

If it was nothing, then they wouldn't have that attitude, right? Most likely there was a dispute between them that she had nothing to do with. But there didn't seem to be a way to learn about that right now. Suppressing any feelings of dissatisfaction, Yuna let herself be pulled by the maids into a nearby room.

In a short time an elderly man entered the room. The man, who was a doctor, efficiently checked Yuna's state and confirmed that she had no great injuries. It was all done very businesslike without him even saying a single word like "You must have had a hard time", but maybe it wasn't easy to speak to the saint. At the end all he asked was "Are you feeling unwell anywhere?", to which Yuna answered she was fine, and then he quickly withdrew from the room.

Then they moved to another room. Once again guided by the maids, she was taken to a large bath. Now that she thought about it, she was soaked wet and covered in mud. It was unmistakably a miserable state unbefitting of the saint. If that was true, then she might have wanted to enter the baths first before being examined by the doctor.

Suddenly, the maids said "Excuse me" and started to remove Yuna's clothes. Yuna was startled. Just moments ago, she had been living as a commoner and now she was getting help to take a bath!? Even though she knew this was common practice for

nobility, she pulled away to refuse them at once.

“Lady Celiastina?”

The maids knitted their brows, puzzled, at Yuna suddenly withdrawing.

“Ah, no, um, I-I’ll be fine alone.”

At her hesitant answer, the maids’ eyes widened in surprise.

“Is something the matter?”

“No, I just want to enter the bath alone today.”

“Please do not say such a thing. We cannot allow Lady Celiastina to bathe alone.”

They had a point. She was the saint who went out alone, unreasonably, and became lost. And she might be guilty of other eccentricities. She might have people who need to stay by her side to watch her. However...

“Um, please, let me enter alone.”

“But–“

“I’ll be FINE!”

She said this with unintentional force and the maids’ faces were suddenly filled with fear. And then, immediately, they lowered their heads greatly and repeated, “We apologize deeply”, over and over.

“U-Um...”

“We have offended you greatly with our lack of thought. We will call for replacements immediately, so please do not be angry.”

There was nothing to be angry about. It was Yuna who was taken aback by the sudden fear in the maids. This wasn’t a situation where she could speak poorly with the maids desperately asking for forgiveness with pale faces. But, during her confusion, the maids were changed, and it wasn’t a situation where she could say something like “I’ll enter alone”. And so, in the end, Yuna left everything up to the maids and finished her

bath while feeling like her face was aflame with embarrassment.

†

It was midnight by the time Yuna was returned to her room and finally alone.

Even though she said returned, this was Yuna's first time entering this room. It was excessively large and luxurious, a ridiculous room that could fit Yuna's house many times over. There were also many items that she didn't recognize set up around the room which would have cost her entire family many hundreds of years of work to purchase. If she hadn't been in her current situation she would have been wandering around in delight, but she didn't even have the energy to feel excited. Yuna threw herself on the soft canopy bed and heaved a large sigh.

(Tired... I'm so tired...)

It can't be helped in a situation like this where she didn't even know right from left. But thinking about how this would continue day after day made her feel weary. She started to feel nostalgic for the time she spent as a village girl without a burden.

(Ah, but I can't return to that anymore. Because Yuna is dead. Once the real Celiastina's soul returns, this time I will head to the afterlife. I will disappear... from this world.)

Yuna thought that this was cruel. If only she had just died completely at that time. Thinking that, she started to feel a bit of hate towards that light. She felt sorry for herself and how she had to live through these days while being tormented by the fear of a slow and gradually approaching death. But now that it's come to this, it is unavoidable for her to live while always being aware of the form of death. It wouldn't leave her mind. She would die, she would die, in the near future...

It was also sad that she couldn't see her parents. Once the current situation calmed down a little, maybe she should secretly go out to see them. But when she thought that she immediately shook her head. Yuna was sure that her parents were mourning her death. And she was going to see them like that? With what kind of expression? Ah, that's right, it was unfilial of her to die earlier than her parents. She couldn't face them after that, right?

No matter what she thought she just became depressed.



Yuna moved her head sluggishly and looked over the large room; there was a full-length mirror in the corner, which reminded her that she hadn't checked her own appearance yet. Thinking that suddenly, Yuna got out of bed quietly and timidly approached the mirror. She stood in front of the mirror, nervous, and slowly raised her head.

And then Yuna was astonished.

What was this. Was this the appearance of a human?

There stood an absurdly beautiful woman. Pale translucent skin and distinct purple eyes. Pale blonde hair that stretched directly to her waist and looked as if it were glimmering. Small and shapely lips, which were parted slightly in shock right now. Her long eyelashes, which swayed each time she blinked, would catch the eyes of anyone. And then, on her neck, the symbol of a saint, the "Holy Mark", was firmly etched.

"W-Wow..."

Certainly, she had heard rumors about Saint Celiastina's beauty and how it surpassed any treasures of this world. But she had thought those were just flowery words to praise the saint. She was wrong. Those weren't just flattery. She's never seen a beauty like this before. Yodel, who she had just met, was also beautiful but Celiastina was even more so. It goes without saying that everything about Celiastina was arranged in such a way that Yuna could not even compare.

"This is... Lady Celiastina."

Yuna recalled the look of contempt that the young man had while standing in front of this angelic woman.

Just this beauty alone would make anyone prostrate themselves before it, but he hated her. Why?

(– Argh, I keep on thinking about that. Stop, stop. Anyway, let's sleep for today. Tomorrow is going to be just as hard.)

Shaking her head, she thought about something else. Yes, tomorrow would be hard. Right now, Yuna knew no one and she would be in a situation where the people around her knew her. Sooner or later, the people around her might start looking at her with suspicion. But Celiastina was definitely going to return one day. Yuna had to do her

best to quickly become familiar with this place so that Celiastina, when she returned, would not be suspicious. That was her mission.

Her life up until now had ended. And now, a new life had begun. The girl who had once been Yuna closed her eyes and firmly accepted that fact.

# Chapter Three

For generations in this world's only country, Sibelius, it was tradition for the saint, always a maiden, to serve the royal family. There was only ever one of these in the world, an extremely beautiful girl with the Holy Mark on her neck. This was the only proof needed for a saint; it didn't matter whether one was born as a noble or as a peasant, so long as one had that mark then they were acknowledged by the royal palace and welcomed in. In other words, without the holy mark then one would never be acknowledged as a saint.

Whenever the previous saint drew her last breath, it was a given that the following year a new saint would be born. It was a rule of the country that the saint had to be discovered before she reached her 15th year and welcomed into the royal palace; and, as she entered the royal palace, it was necessary for her to be joined with the young man awarded the position of the First Holy Knight in an engagement ceremony. If this wasn't done, then it was said that a disaster would befall the kingdom. In the long history of Sibelius, there were only three instances where a saint had not been welcomed into the palace. During the first time, the people underwent a great flood and 40% of the population died; during the second time, the three most powerful forces in the kingdom clashed and all three powers were destroyed in the civil war; during the third, an epidemic had spread and it was reported that 40% of the population had died. Because of these, the entrance of the saint into the royal palace was not just an issue limited to the powers of the country, but a serious event all of the people in the country looked forward to.

In this way, the existence of a saint was one that the country could not be without, but these women were also endowed with mysterious powers. There were those proficient in foresight and those who could read minds; however, there was one thing all the saints shared. When a saint approached death, the Holy Mark on their neck disappeared. And once the Holy Mark disappeared, within three years, the saint was sure to pass away. For that reason, it was customary for the kingdom to use that as a reference to decide on the next First Holy Knight. A child, born when the current saint's Holy Mark disappeared, would be raised to become the husband of the next generation's saint. Up to now, everything went smoothly like that. Although it was not a problem for the saint to be welcomed into the royal palace so long as they hadn't reached 15, they were generally discovered when they were young and moved to the

castle. As for the Holy Knight, they were raised to accept their duty from the moment of their birth. Naturally, their preparedness would be solid and their bonds deep.

But, of its own accord, this time was different.

First, it took an extremely long time to find the saint. Celiastina was an abandoned child, one that was not doted on and grew up in the corner of a declining orphanage. The director and his wife managed the small orphanage between the two of them, but it took all their efforts to keep the large amount of children there “alive”, and so they didn’t keep a particular eye on Celiastina. It took a very, very long time for the Holy Mark on her neck to be noticed. In most cases, it is at the request of the parents themselves that most saints are discovered, but if there is no one who comes forward then the search becomes extremely difficult. By the time the director approached Celiastina, who had matured beautifully as a 15 year old, with malicious thoughts and noticed the mark on her neck for the first time, the entire country was already drifting in a mood of despair. At any rate, the country of Sibelius, which had somehow located its saint, burst into excitement. Celiastina was welcomed greatly throughout the country; her unlucky upbringing greatly helped in attracting the people’s concern. Moreover, her beauty which surpassed that of all previous saints mesmerized everyone. Similarly, the First Holy Knight, who had been brought up and raised under personal care, had matured into a strong young man. With just this, everyone could see the light in the future of their kingdom.

–However, Celiastina passed her time obediently in the royal palace only for the first two years. When she became 16, she suddenly changed. It was as if her obedience up to then had been a lie. At any rate, there was a change.

Her change was known only to those in the royal palace. To the common people, Celiastina was always a magnificent messenger of God.

But the present Yuna had no way of knowing that.



Yuna was surprised when she woke up in the morning and the splendidly ornamented and colored ceiling entered her vision. Upon wondering where she was, she immediately cast her vision about, and what she saw seemed to be the bed canopy. The thin lace that covered the area fluttered and swayed from a breeze coming in from the window. Yuna’s body was submerged in the middle of that.

(Ah, that's right.)

As expected, she was able to remember her situation quicker than the time she woke up at the riverside yesterday. She was Celiastina and this was her luxurious room. She had been rescued from the forest yesterday and, while she was thinking everything over, she fell asleep.

"Good morning, Lady Celiastina."

A maid said in an apathetic voice. It looks like she had been the one to open the window.

For a moment Yuna was slow to realize who the maid was calling out to, but when she quickly realized that it was herself she raised her head... just when she had confirmed her situation too. I am Celiastina, I am Celiastina; Yuna chanted this like a spell.

"Good morning."

When Yuna lowered her head sincerely, the maid's expression stiffened as if she saw something unbelievable. Was she not supposed to use polite words?

"Please wait a moment, I will call someone immediately to change your clothes."

The maid barely seemed to get those words out, so Yuna limited herself to just nodding in order not to frighten her any further. Besides... someone to change her clothes. Not just for bathing, but did she have to use maids to change as well?

Her premonition was realized. Soon, two maids arrived, and a complete set of clothing, loaded on a tray, was placed solemnly on a table.

"Lady Celiastina, please excuse us."

The maids strove to say that without emotion. Would every morning be like this? Oh, come on, that'd be something she'd want to pass on.

"Um, I, would like to change alone though..."

Even as she wondered if this would end the same way it did yesterday, she couldn't let this happen without resistance.

“By yourself, my lady?”

“Erm, well, it’s definitely not because you people are nuisances. Please believe me. Even if it’s late, I just find people helping me change to be...”

Even though she tried to choose words that would not provoke them as much as possible, it seemed useless. The maids were completely flustered.

“U-Um, did we do something as to offend you, Lady Celiastina?”

“N-No! Look, wouldn’t you people think it’s weird to be changed by someone as well? I might have allowed this to happen up to now as if it were natural, but honestly I felt a little embarrassed.”

Ah, it’s no good. The more she spoke the more she got stuck. Seeing the maids unmoving as if they were frozen, Yuna had no choice but to draw back this time as well. Without saying anything more unreasonable, Yuna entrusted herself to the maids who changed her with extremely awkward motions. Once the preparations were done, the maids left the room like they were running away.

(Umm, it seems like they were really frightened.)

Even someone like Yuna noticed that. The maids and everyone were scared of her; they finished their work in the shortest time possible so that they could leave and avoid any unnecessary interactions.

(Who is Lady Celiastina? Is she that scary of a person?)

It looks like that was the case. And that was why if she behaved even with the slightest bit of modesty, she might receive reactions of people looking at her like she was a monster.

(Just what kind of person was the Lady Saint?)

Oh dear... just as she was sighing there was the sound of a light knock. Please enter, she said these brief words and soon the door opened, allowing a man to enter the room in a leisurely manner.

As soon as she saw the man’s appearance she felt like her heart was being gripped tightly and, for a second, Yuna’s breathing stopped.

(Again!)

While being confused by the hammering beat of her heart, Yuna looked down and furrowed her brows. This was the same as when she felt anger towards the woman called Yodel last night. A feeling born from some unknown part of her. Why was she becoming so upset right now? Just what exactly was this feeling? She didn't know the reason.

As the throbbing of her heart slowly lessened, Yuna pulled herself together and raised her face. The man who entered her room looked like he was a bit past his mid-twenties. His hair was a deep brown, a shade darker than the door, and tied into one bundle where it flowed behind him casually. Even though he walked over to her with a gentle smile and his appearance looked kind, she could feel somewhat of a pressure. Having said that, when she thought about it, she felt like this was the first time she saw someone smile since arriving here.

"It seems like you really are unharmed, hm."

She was surprised at his voice. Even people like that important-looking young man and Yodel used terms of respect towards her, and yet this person... Could he be the king or someone in a position linked to that?

"Hm? What's the matter?"

"Nothing..."

"You aren't feeling unwell, right?"

Yuna gave a small nod.

"But."

"?"

"You're acting quite strange."

Startled, her body became stiff. This only deepened the other's suspicions, and he narrowed his eyes to observe her closely.

"Celia."

“Yes?”

She was also surprised to hear him call the saint by a nickname. Who was this? Could he be Celiastina’s lover?

“What on earth is the matter? You’re like a lion without fangs.”

What the heck was with that expression. When she glared at him indignantly, he smiled with amusement.

“Yes, yes, that’s more like you. But something more like you would be if you said “What? Just who are you speaking those words to? Do you want to become dust?””

Yuna became speechless at those words.

“As I thought, it’s strange.”

“.....”

“Celia, try saying my name.”

“Uh.”

“You can’t possibly say you forgot it, or something like that, right?”

“Uhhhhhmm.”

“Celia.”

“.....”

It’s no good, she couldn’t trick him. Yuna realized this instinctually; she couldn’t do anything but surrender to someone who saw through her and thought her strange in a one to two word conversation.

“.....Um, I don’t know. I’m sorry.”

When she answered apologetically, the man kept silent and just raised an eyebrow. He was a strange man, one that she couldn’t even guess at what he was thinking about. She really didn’t know.



After some time of silence, he opened his mouth again.

“Amnesia?”

That’s right! Yuna was hit with that sudden realization. This was good. In this case, some strangeness would be overlooked. She had been taking a walk in the forest, her foot slipped and she fell into the river, and then lost her memory from that crash. Alright, she’d go with that.

“Somehow, that seems to be the case.”

“Is that so?”

Even though he was the one who brought it up, the man tilted his head, and then walked directly up to Yuna. He watched attentively as she unconsciously clasped both her hands and then suddenly grasped her chin, raising her face up. Even though she wanted to raise her voice and ask him what he was doing, she found herself in a strange situation where she couldn’t resist. There was not a speck of sweetness in this atmosphere, instead a tense air wrapped around the room. Her opponent had a serious expression and looked carefully into Yuna’s eyes.

“Is it just memory loss? You know, I don’t think so. Your eyes have the color of a guilty conscience. I didn’t think you would try to deceive me. Now, please confess everything. What’s the reason as to why you’ve become as meek as a lamb and obedient?”

A really worrisome opponent has appeared, Yuna clicked her tongue inwardly as she thought this. But, if she considered this calmly, this might be the thing she needed. There was a limit to what she could do in the midst of everyone around her being a complete stranger. If that was the case, wasn’t it better for her to have at least one ally? Having that on her mind – or more like she couldn’t help but think that – Yuna gave up and opened her mouth.

“I... am not Celiastina.”

And then she began to speak haltingly. She spoke about how Celiastina’s soul was exhausted, how God was worried greatly about that, and how he took her soul to be cared for. In the meantime, she was a completely different soul sent here to maintain Celiastina’s body.

Of course she didn’t talk about the suicide. She also didn’t know the true identity of

the lights and so decided to gloss over them and call them God. But even so, most of what she said was the truth. Realistically speaking, these contents weren't something one could accept but the man listened to her story very seriously and she was glad.

Once she finished her story from start to end, Yuna let out a sigh of relief. This was much too large of a thing for one person to be saddled with, and it was an unbearable story. This story was one that was too large for one person to be saddled with and she almost couldn't bear it. Somewhere in her heart, she might have wanted someone to hear everything and share this weight.

The man, after a while of staring at Yuna as if he were looking for something, solemnly nodded.

"Well, this is a story that deviates wildly from common sense, but it is true that you are not Celiastina. I cannot think of you as anything but a pure and innocent girl, without an ill-natured bone in your body. Even if you were acting, Celiastina wouldn't be able to have such clear eyes."

If he believed her then it'd save her a lot of trouble, but his words were unexpected.

"U-Um, who are you?"

"Hm? Me? Ah yes, you don't know anything, huh. I am Linus Ventriss, an advisor to this country's prime minister."

"Advisor to the prime minister?"

As she thought, he was an important person. It was difficult for Yuna, who had been a commoner just last night, to imagine but if he worked under a person who could influence the politics of this country, then there was no doubt that he had considerable status.

"And I am also Celia's guardian."

"I-I see."

In other words, he acted as Celiastina's foster parent. In that case, she could understand his informal attitude to her.

"Anyway, that's enough about me. You say you are to live here in place of Celiastina but

your personality and thoughts are 180 degrees different. I'm worried about whether you'll be alright."

"Was Lady Celiastina that... um... amazing?"

"Amazing, huh."

It's not what one says, it's how one says it, Linus seemed to say as he laughed in an amused way.

"Oh yes, she was quite amazing. She was a person with an amazingly twisted personality; a person who would not let anyone get close to her, and one who would do whatever she pleased. I don't need to say how everyone looks at you with doubtful eyes, right? That's how it is."

"There are moments that come to mind, yes. Like how everyone stands on ceremony."

On the contrary, there were also people who showed a cold attitude that couldn't be settled with just the words "stand on ceremony".

"Um, are you familiar with the person who found me yesterday?"

"Do you mean Asyut?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't even know his name."

"The black-haired and dark-eyed handsome young man?"

Yes, most likely that person. Yuna nodded slowly.

"He is the First Holy Knight. In other words, Celia's fiancé."

"-WHAT!?"

That person was her fiancé!? Even though he showed such hatred towards her!? Yuna was reflexively taken aback.

"T-Things don't seem to be going very well, are they?"

"Yes, that's right, Celia is hated by him."

“But, why...?”

Oops, Linus seemed to say as he smiled and shook his head.

“I’m not such an uncouth man as to poke my nose into the love affairs of a young couple.”

“I-I’m sorry.”

Realizing that she had asked a very obtrusive question, Yuna shrank back.

“Oh my, why are you apologizing? If you are going to be Celia from here on, you will fall short like that. Come now, throw your chest out more.”

“But I don’t know a single thing about Lady Celiastina. What should I do?”

That’s right, Linus seemed to say as he put his hand on his chin and thought.

“Then how about I tell you a bit about Celiastina’s daily life?”

For example, he implied as he folded his fingers and started counting.

“When the maids are doing up your hair, you say “Hey, you. Stop pulling. It hurts obviously” and glare sidelong at them. When eating, every time you have to complain about at least three dishes. When people who pass by greet you, you say “Shut up” once every three times. When they don’t greet you, you say coldly “Who do you think you are?” and immediately fire them. If there seems to be something like garbage on the path you are walking, you will immediately call a cleaner and fire them. During times of prayer in the cathedral, you will face the priest who is doing a long sermon and click your tongue before sighing on purpose... Hm, yes, that’s about it for now.”

Being told these outrageous things in such a bright tone, Yuna was frozen. She turned his words over in her mind as she stood there, stuck. Can these things really be settled into a category by using a sweet word like “ill-natured”? Also, are these things that she would have to do in the future?!

(Impossible.)

Yuna was led to that conclusion without even a second of hesitation.

“Until the real Celiastina returns I will act like I am amnesic. It’s impossible for me to act in a way that won’t make people think I’m weird.”

“I suppose so. I’m fine with that... but, Celia.”

Is there more? Half wanting to hang her head and cry, Yuna only glanced at him.

“There are people you must be cautious about. They are people who would not show you any mercy even if you told them you were amnesic.”

“W-Who?”

“The priestess, Yodel Vidoria. House Vidoria is a famous household of priests who have served this kingdom for generations. They have equal, if not more, influence than your fiancé as the First Holy Knight.”

That name struck her immediately. It was the woman who greeted her at the gates last night. Yuna had thought that she was an important person the moment she saw her, but to think it was to this extent.

“For a long time she and Celia have had bad relations. Well, considering Celia’s personality that might have been inevitable but Sister Yodel is quite strong-willed as well. At any rate, Sister Yodel treats Celia like an enemy and also has influence so she quarrels with Celia without much timidity. If she sees an opportunity, it will certainly be dangerous. There are also rumors that she is trying to abase the saint’s authority.”

Goodness, weren’t there nothing but enemies around the saint!? Moreover, even a person who was supposed to get along with the saint seemed to regard her with hostility. This really made Yuna concerned for the future.

“Lastly.”

“...is there something more?”

No matter what he said, she wouldn’t be surprised.

“You don’t need to use such polite language towards me. Even if you are another person, having Celia’s body act so humbly is creepy.”

She blanked at that unexpected change in topic. But she was thankful for those friendly

words and obediently nodded. And, as if he were satisfied, Linus grinned and stroked Yuna's hair.

"You're a good girl, Celia."

Celia, that was such a nice nickname. At any rate, while feeling relieved at having found someone to share her secret, Yuna quietly let her hair be stroked.

†

Of course Yuna didn't know this but apparently the saint had a daily routine of attending a Ceremony of Worship in the morning. Due to Linus' visit, she completely skipped out on that daily routine. Yuna became depressed at how this would just make everyone's impression of her worsen.

It wasn't that Linus also didn't know but, originally, he came to see to see Celiastina's state just a bit before the worship. He would never have dreamed that her soul had been replaced with another person. It was no wonder that the topic of the worship hadn't been brought up.

"You are still feeling unwell from last night's events and thus was absent from today's worship. I'll settle it like that."

"Yes, I am grateful."

"Now, now, your language."

"I-I apologi-... ack."

Linus gave a wry smile upon seeing Yuna flustered.

"Celia, just now you said you wanted to make your story seem coherent by claiming amnesia, right? I support that, but I don't think you should claim it openly."

"For what reason? No, I mean, uh... why?"

"Up until now, you have been behaving with extreme eccentricities, and now it has become a situation where there are those who question the state of things with you as a saint. That is also a reason as to why Sister Yodel treats you like an enemy. Well, as long as there is the Holy Mark on your neck, people won't actually interfere with

you. Nevertheless, it is undesirable to mess around and increase your enemies. If people found out that your disappearance last night was the cause of your amnesia then, not just your enemies, your allies may also take advantage of you and it could bring about a lot of trouble.”

The Amnesic Immoral Saint. Without a doubt, it would be a huge commotion.

“Nonetheless, it would be impossible to do everything the same. I believe it would be best to talk about your amnesia only to those necessary. People who could back you up as if it were no big deal.”

“Ah.....”

“For example, someone like your fiancé, Asyut.”

“.....ah.”

Upon remembering that piercing gaze, Yuna felt reluctant. If she said she was amnesic it seems like he would treat her even more coldly, to say nothing of covering for her.

“He will immediately notice that there is something strange about you. Of course, you don’t intend to tell anyone about replacing Celiastina’s soul and things like that, right?”

“Yes, of course not. I wasn’t intending to tell anyone but you, Linus.”

“If that’s the case, maintain your expressions well and behave as much like Celia as possible. And if people frown at you, you can indirectly hint at your amnesia. But do that conservatively. You can keep that up until that girl returns eventually, right?”

Although it was summarized concisely, it was not as easy as it sounded for Yuna. She was just an ordinary girl that one could find anywhere, and yet she was to act occasionally like a wicked woman and occasionally like a pitiful girl who lost her memories..... If she could act like that, there was no mistake that she would have led a much more different life. Though that life was already finished.

“Well then, please rest here for a while longer. I will go and explain today’s absence to the priests in the chapel, and tell them that it’s because you have a Ceremony of Blessing for the nobles just before noon.”

“Huh!? W-W-What is this Ceremony of Blessing?”

“Because a number of nobles arrive at the room of blessing, you receive them there, and give them a single word of blessing. It’s just that kind of ceremony, don’t worry.”

“Even if you say that... w-what kind of words should I say?”

“Hm, let’s see, something like “Before asking for my blessing, shouldn’t you go to a barbershop and ask for a wig?” to Lord Boundi today.”

.....she shouldn’t have asked.

“I’m kidding, it’s a joke. Though you should say things in a sarcastic tone like how Celia used to. Just think of it as a place to practice acting cruel. Even the nobles who turn up aren’t expecting sweet words from you. They are conditioned to sharp words. –Now then, I’ll come by later to pick you up so be nice and quiet for a short while.”

“.....Yes, of course.”

“Also, language again. Be careful.”

“.....okay.”

Her journey ahead was going to be full of trouble.

During the time she was waiting in her room for Linus, no one else came to visit.

Did the girl, Celiastina, spend her time like this every day? Not doing anything, just being bored. What awaited her next was a meaningless and boring ceremony. Once that was over, would she come back and pass the time in idleness like this? If that was going to repeat every day, she would definitely grow to hate it. Certainly, it wasn’t like she had dramatic days in her previous life, but there were many small pleasures; there were small medicinal herbs she grew personally and set up in her store, various dishes she studied, friends who entertained her, and holding and looking after her relative’s baby. None of that was particularly special but they were definitely scenes of a precious time to her. To think that, right now, they felt like such far away things.

“Haa...”

Not having anything to do, Yuna threw herself down onto her bed. What exactly was she supposed to do before noon? What did Celiastina do? As far as she could see, there were just high-class looking furnishings that were arranged coldly and inhumanly.



Linus gave her a warning to be quiet but moving around in this room was reckless.

(Ah, that's it.)

Yuna realized it. She couldn't feel any suggestion of a person living in this room. It was hollow. The only gentle thing she felt was from the sunlight shining in from the balcony. As soon as she realized this, Yuna felt homesick.

(No, I don't want to stay in this room.)

I want to go home, Yuna thought strongly. But it was too late, she remembered there was no place for her to return to anymore.

She would never again return to those trifling days which weren't anything special.

(I didn't leave anything behind. Because I thought those days would keep on going. I never thought I would suddenly lose them like this. If-... if I could return back to that time, there would be so many things I'd want to do. It was almost time for me to transplant my potted norma grass into the garden. I wasn't done mixing the medicinal herbs that Auntie Hanchi had asked for, even though she said that Yuna's medicine worked the best. And she had still been in a fight with Rin.

Things she wanted to do and things she hadn't done rapidly came to mind. She didn't think it would be so painful to have to give up on the things she normally did.

"If I could return to those days, I would tell my dad and mom that I loved them dozens of times."

At the very least, she tried to say the things she hadn't said, but there was no one here to reply to her.

The year will surely be long. This time that would be her last "time" that was given to her as Celiastina. This time she could see the end. And that's why she didn't want to leave behind any regrets.

Even if that wasn't time as "Yuna".

Just like he said, Linus came to pick up Yuna some time around noon.

On their way to the blessing room, she was instructed as to how to act as Saint Celiastina. She was told to be arrogant, listless, and offensive. Was there no positive advice?

“The rest is just a formality but don’t move from the altar. The others will greet you first but all you do is just say one word of blessing, without returning their greetings. There is even of them, so just repeat that. Once everyone is done, they will excuse themselves and withdraw. Simple, right?”

“But what are the words of blessing?”

“Don’t worry about it and just say something appropriately sarcastic. Don’t think too hard.”

“Appropriately sarcastic” he says! Sorry, but she’s never done anything like saying appropriately sarcastic things. However, even though he said something like that, Yuna didn’t have a response and so she quietly held her tongue. They went passed through the courtyard of the royal palace to the room of blessing. Upon arriving at the entrance, Yuna passed through alone.

The room of blessing was surprisingly small; it was just a precious white hexagonal room. The vaulted ceiling had several large skylights from which natural light shone down brightly. From the entrance, she could see several stairs deep inside and they reached an altar at the top. The structure of the room was very simple but, conversely, it struck her as being more divine.

She ascended to the altar. Somehow, this space reminded her of “that time”. That space where Yuna’s life had been greatly driven crazy. Where was the mysterious existence right now, the one that brought about a second life for her?

“Please excuse us.”

There was a sudden voice some time after she reached her seat, and then the dignified-looking doors opened. A middle-aged man of a fine appearance gave a deep bow and entered the room. Following that, six men did the same and entered.

Yuna immediately realized it was beginning. She psyched herself up to make a listless expression but, as she was psyching herself up, doubts floated by about how she was already far from being listless.

Leaving that in her mind as it was, she solemnly went forward with the ceremony.

The men lined up in a row in front of the altar. Everyone was wearing tailored and dazzling clothes and they were just like the image of “aristocrats” that Yuna had in her mind. She was repeating herself but for Yuna, who was a commoner, just having them line up in a row made her feel as though her breath stopped.

“Lady Saint, my name is Delioru Yubius.”

The rightmost man opened his mouth abruptly.

“Please grant me your blessing.”

It was extremely frank. It was so direct that Yuna’s mind went blank. Sarcasm. She was supposed to be sarcastic in such a holy atmosphere. That was impossible.

“.....Um.”

Yuna mumbled, losing her presence of mind. But the seven people, as seven, did nothing but keep their heads lowered and no one interjected.

“.....I grant you the blessing of our God, Vida.”

Unable to endure the atmosphere of this place, she spoke some extremely normal and mediocre words. As soon as that happened, the man called Delioru raised his head with an expression of fright.

Silence.

“M-My name is Balus Missiu. Lady Saint, please grant me your blessing.”

The second person, who seemed to have pulled himself together, said these words timidly.

“.....Our God, Vida, will always be at your side at any time.”

When she said that, the second man's eyes widened and he raised his head.

They are scared. They were absolutely terrified. Yuna could see that but, that being said, she had not the slightest idea of what she should do. The nobles themselves looked extremely defeated; everyone was stiff with pale faces. To be this frightened of common words of blessing, just what kind of abuse had been hurled at them normally? It looks like Celiastina was someone completely unimaginable.

This wasn't good. In the end, being decent wasn't going to work. Yuna hid her grim resolve in her chest.

"L-Lady Saint, my name is Claude Trevasen..... P-P-Please grant me your blessing."

The seventh man had shrunk into himself pitifully. He was surely a great noble who lived carefreely in his own land. And yet, right now, he was a miserable sight and trembling more than a child would in that area.

"You—"

As she gave him a look of pity, Yuna opened her mouth.

"—look like a peacock wrapped in a fancy scarf. Are you an idiot?"

In that moment, the area was completely frozen.

†

"I'm done. No more!"

"Calm down, Celia."

Linus entered the room of blessing while trying to hold back his chuckles.

"As I thought, this is impossible for me! I can't be like Lady Celiastina!"

"No, really, that was a masterpiece."

Linus wiped away a tear in the corner of his eyes while his shoulders still shook. Yuna felt a great resentment as she gave him a sidelong glare.

“Isn’t it strange? I just said some common things and they were that scared. That was absolutely weird.”

“What are you angry about? To me, I can’t see this as anything but a clown who failed at their performance under the spotlight getting angry at the wrong person.”

“Are you calling me a clown!? Who do you think told me to do something like that!”

“Now, now, you still did well. I didn’t think that, after coming to that point, you would go there at the very end...ahaha.”

“Please stop laughing already!”

It was really terrible. At the very, very end because she lost her mind and blurted out those words, the place became wrapped in a cold atmosphere. The only man who was spoken ill of, the peacock man Claude Trevasen, looked to be incomprehensibly at a loss. Each and every one of the others, who were also dumbfounded, looked between Yuna and Trevasen, silent. Unable to endure being in this quiet confusion, where no one said a word, one second longer Yuna told them “Get out”. The moment she said that the aristocrats scattered and disappeared like spiderlings. When Yuna opened the door, while falling into deep self-loathing, Linus was there – having stealthily been taking a look at how things were going from the outside – holding his stomach and laughing.

“If you treated them in that manner from the beginning then it would have ended without an incident.”

“I can’t do that normally.”

“Didn’t you just do that at the end? Well, in short, you’ll become accustomed. There are heaps of other ceremonies like that, so sooner or later you’ll be able to naturally be insulting.”

“Is that supposed to be something good.....?”

This man, who she couldn’t read, didn’t respond to her muttering and only kept smiling.

“At any rate, you might actually have more talent than the real Celia. It’s more powerful to show contempt for just one person rather than showing contempt for all of them

equally.”

“I’ve told you to stop talking about that already!”

“Anyway, keep up with this attitude. You can do it when you try, Celia.”

It was neither something she wanted to do nor something she felt good about doing. That was what she thought, but Yuna didn’t have the energy left to open her mouth any more than that.

†

Yuna had deliberately ignored what Linus said about there being “heaps of ceremonies like that” but, after half the day, she came to realize painfully the weight of those words.

First, after the Ceremony of Blessing, there was the Ceremony of Noon Purification, where she was thrown into a room with burning incense for an hour. Once that was done, the next was the Ceremony of Hymns where a number of priests and priestesses faced each other on their knees and praised God. Yuna was able to rest a short while after that but then, around evening, she had to appear on the balcony of the royal palace and wave in response to the cheers of the people who gathered there. Even more, after that, the Ceremony of Celebration followed where she had to give a kiss of blessing to the statue of a fantastical animal, the God’s beast, Arco.

Why exactly was this necessary? There were many things that held no meaning.

Yuna, and other people like her, were followers of their God, Vida, who they held with reverence. She couldn’t they say they were zealous, they were pious enough to devote prayers occasionally to God in their daily lives..... though, she had been pious. For some reason that feeling seemed to have disappeared; she went through way too many meaningless ceremonies. She had no intention of being blasphemous to God but she couldn’t understand the importance of these ceremonies at all.

Besides, in that “white world”, the mysterious light had said that the saint being a messenger of God was nothing but a pretence that the people made up, and that they weren’t God. If that was the case then what exactly were the saints and God they worshipped? Even though she tried thinking on it, she couldn’t see the answer.

(These ceremonies... aren't they just things to satisfy ourselves as humans?)

Haa, breathing out a large sigh, Yuna staggered alone through a long, long passage.

She had just finished the Ceremony of Dusk Purification, where she had to bathe in cold water away from the royal palace. It was also a meaningless ceremony but she was able to spend time alone there and had a change of pace. There had been many people who minded over her excessively; moreover, all of them were clearly frightened of the saint. Considering how Celiastina was up to now, it would have been unnatural if she was amiable. But even so, Yuna wasn't able to treat them badly. She was stuck between a rock and a hard place, and so it was extremely tiring. By the time she was waving her hand on the balcony, she had been so tired she couldn't even feel nervous.

However, the servants really couldn't seem to stop themselves from glancing at Yuna. It seemed Celiastina doing something like obediently attending all the ceremonies was normally unthinkable. And so, the expressions of the people who looked at Yuna – though unsociable had waved at the people without complaint – had such a pained pallor that, on the contrary, she was the one who became scared.

(I also haven't seen Linus at all since that time.)

That person was still someone she didn't know well. But even so, the other had no hesitation in interacting with her that she was able to relax. She would have liked to have him by her side to support her but it looked like he didn't have any intentions of concerning himself with her more than was necessary. Maybe because he was the advisor to the prime minister of the country he didn't have that much free time. He might also be telling her that since it is her body she was to do something about it herself. He seemed to be a friendly person but he might be the type of person to draw a clear line between him and others.

Suddenly, there was the sound of other footsteps in the passage. Tap, tap, the footsteps were brisk and had a regular rhythm. When Yuna's gaze, which had been wandering aimlessly at the dim scenery outside the window, returned to the passage, she saw the familiar black-haired young man walking her way. She recalled that his name was Asyut.

“.....Good evening.”

Because he seemed like he was going to ignore her when his walking speed didn't

change, Yuna spoke up first. It seemed like the other hadn't been about to ignore her though, since he stopped and greeted her with a bow.

"Have you recovered your good health?"

Those words were an obligatory expression; they held no emotion. It was plain that he did not really care about Yuna's health.

"Yes, thanks to you."

"I am relieved. If anything were to happen to your body, I would not be able to express the depths of my regret."

Do you really think that? Yuna reflexively wanted to ask this.

"Where are you heading to from here?"

Somehow she was able to endure it though and threw out a safe question. She remembered that the direction Asyut was heading had nothing but places set aside for ceremonies, and so she suddenly had questions about why this man was heading there.

"I thought to practice my swordsmanship. I believe Lady Celiastina is not aware of this, but on the way to the purification rooms there is a training ground."

"I see."

Looking at him, Asyut's clothes were definitely different from the time she saw him last night. He was wearing a shirt that opened loosely around his chest, black pants, and boots; the whole ensemble looked comparatively easy to move in. And then in his hand he carried an elegant long sword which was ill-matched with the simplicity of his clothes.

"Alone?"

"Yes. Though I was training with the soldiers until just now."

"I see."

There was absolutely no momentum to the conversation. Yuna thought that was



natural since the other person hated her but there was something she still couldn't understand. The relationship between these two. Linus had said these two were engaged. But no matter how she looked at it, he acted like he was a retainer. She couldn't feel any air of them being a future couple.

"It appears that you are alone as well. Has something come to pass with your maids?"

A fleeting of accusation appeared in Asyut's eyes. And Yuna, who was not used to his gaze, flinched.

Moreover, she couldn't possibly tell him that she pressured her maids to leave her.

"Please limit your acts of convenience and be careful with your health."

It looked like he hadn't been wanting an answer from the start and immediately continued talking. Even though he was indifferent to her, all he did was scold her. Yuna suddenly became angry.

"Thank you for your concern!"

Saying that, Yuna went to pass by Asyut. If they spoke any more than this they would just increase their mutual hate for each other. She needed to hurry and limit this to just leaving.

However, unexpectedly, Asyut stopped Yuna, who had been leaving.

"Lady Celiastina."

What? All she did was turn her head to glance at him.

"May I inquire about something?"

"What is it?"

"Did something happen yesterday?"

Yesterday. Even if he asked that, she couldn't think of anything but what happened at the brook.

"I felt that you were acting strange since the morning of yesterday. However, without

saying anything, you went alone into the forest. What happened there? After I found you in the river, this sense of discomfort has increased even more.”

“T-That’s...”

She was obviously flustered. Asyut narrowed his eyes slightly and examined Yuna.

It looked like he was waiting for the continuation of “That’s...”.

“I don’t remember... what I was thinking about... that morning.”

Nervously, Yuna opened her mouth. However, it didn’t seem like that was an answer that satisfied him. For a moment, Asyut had an expression of astonishment before he glared at Yuna.

“What are you saying...”

“I don’t remember anything. Not myself. Not you. Nothing about everything around me. Because I’ve lost my memories.”

Upon seeing the color of Asyut’s face change, Yuna hurriedly talked on and on.

“What I remember is coming to awareness underneath that cliff. I know absolutely nothing about what I’ve done up to now, and what kind of person I am. I discussed this with Linus, but he said that my memory loss wouldn’t be welcomed and so I was to do my best not to tell anyone..... I told you because you didn’t seem like you’d drop this.”

“Truly, you’ve managed to come up with another vicious torment.”

“It’s not a torment! Honestly, I went through this day with a lot of difficulty. Do you know how glad I’d be if this was all just a trick...?”

“I don’t care about any of that.”

Asyut declared this flatly. His eyes were cold. And he looked down on Yuna, as if piercing her with that look.

“If you claim that you’ve forgotten, then I would like for you to remember everything as soon as possible. Did you think that these words about memory loss would put an end to everything that happened up to now? At least, it has no effect on me. If you are

expecting me to be kind and considerate to you, please throw those expectations away immediately.”

“Wha.....”

At those extreme words, Yuna felt herself quickly turning pale. It didn’t matter if she lost her memories? She was greatly mistaken to think he’d treat her kindly? — those words — were they not too much?

“How are you able to say such cruel things? Weren’t you the one just now who told me to tell you about anything that happened? So, why do you have to look down on me? If you hadn’t asked, then I wouldn’t have told you about my memory loss.”

“Because you are too irresponsible.”

“Are you talking about my carelessness in going to forest alone and slipping and falling into the river? If so then yes, you may be right, but to say those things because of that...!”

“You’re mistaken.”

Asyut interrupted Yuna’s agitated words and shook his head.

“It is impossible to return your deeds up until now back to nothing. I absolutely won’t forgive you. That is all.”

It felt like her head had been struck with how his words crashed into her head. That stinging pain passed down into the inner corner of her eyes when she blinked.

“In addition, Lady Celiastina, please do not use polite words on me. You are a person who stands at the very top of all the people. You do not have to treat a retainer like me equally.”

Yuna glared at Asyut.

“Linus said the same thing. But Linus laughed when he said that it was creepy for me to use polite language towards him. You-... are different, aren’t you. You don’t see me as anything but a decorated messenger of God. You think that as long as I’m alive and here then that is good enough.”

“.....”

“You... hate me very much, huh.”

You’re saying that now, at this point? Asyut’s unimpressed gaze seemed to say as he looked at Yuna.

†

Her heart was in unbearable pain.

Every time, when she looked back on that incident, it feels like something is squeezing her chest.

Yuna buried herself in her bed and hugged her trembling body. The maids had brought dinner but she didn’t have an appetite. Even the warm steam carrying the smell of food was nothing but a bother to Yuna right now.

Asyut’s powerful eyes. His strong voice. When she first met him, she remembered being drawn to both of those. But now that was futile. It wasn’t ever going to happen again, the way his eyes and voice enveloped her directly like that time at the river. Besides, at that time, the only point of importance for him was whether or not the “saint” was alive or dead. There was unmistakably not the slightest hint of consideration for the young girl who had been suddenly dropped into a forest with no one there.

Why did he hate the saint? He even declared that he wouldn’t forgive the deeds that had been done up to now. What exactly did Celiastina do to him? Could it be, that it wasn’t just him? Did she commit an unforgiveable folly to every single person around her?

(That might be it.)

It wasn’t normal for everyone to be so frightened of her. Would they shrink away so blatantly if she had been a saint who was just more or less annoying and selfish? Wouldn’t they just have had disgusted expressions and think, ah, it’s that troublesome woman again. However, the only thing that appeared on everyone’s faces was the color of terror.

(Should I try asking Linus?)

And then he could tell her in detail as to how Celiastina acted up until now. But then again, he wouldn't tell her about the antagonism between Celiastina and Asyut.

(What should I do?)

Haa, releasing a big sigh, Yuna turned over in her bed. In the quiet of the large room, her sigh resounded terribly.

There was also one more thing she was curious about. Not long ago, there were additional feelings that occupied her heart. Anger, hatred, and— sadness. Which, right now, mirrored her current feelings well. However, it was clear that these feelings were “someone else's”.

(Are you... here?)

In her heart.

Yuna tried asking softly.

She's experienced this several times since yesterday; this sensation of another person's feelings eroding her heart. Someone else. There was only one person to be considered.

Celiastina.

Without speaking, Yuna tried calling that name. There was no response. However, Yuna had confidence in this. She couldn't explain it well but she felt like she was definitely right.

Celiastina.

Once again, she called out.

Right now, you're feeling sad, aren't you.

Yuna tried closing her eyes patiently like that but there was no response, through feelings or words. Instead, for some reason there were flurried noises coming closer to here. It seemed like people's footsteps. Several of them. At the same time, there were

sounds of voices raised in a small struggle.

(.....What the?)

Suspicious, Yuna sat up in bed. The footsteps that she had thought would pass by stopped unexpectedly in front of her room. As a voice rose loudly into a shout, someone knocked on her door.

“Who is it?”

When she answered, frightened, the voices outside ceased suddenly. Even through the door she could hear the presence of someone catching their breath. But then, soon, the voice of a young man called out “Excuse me” and opened the door with force.

The person who entered was a young man who was around her age. With blond hair and blue eyes, he brought about an aristocratic air but going by his appearance she didn’t think he had much status. The man focused on Yuna with an expression of being at his wits’ end, and kneeled. Behind him stood soldiers, who appeared to be his comrades, and there were several maids who held back and lingered near the vicinity of the door. Yuna was completely bewildered, but it was obvious that they would do nothing but stand and watch.

“Please excuse my sudden appearance at this time of night.”

The young man said this in a dignified voice, in contrast to the faint sweat on his face due to his nervousness.

“My name is Aeneas Delray. On this occasion, I have a request to beg of you, Lady Celiastina. I acknowledge my rudeness.”

Aeneas, one of the soldiers, who were standing bolt upright at the door, muttered this in a voice packed with censure. It looked like they had done everything they could to chase after and stop this young man. But, because that didn’t happen, they were now at a complete loss.

“A request of me?”

Yuna was also puzzled. In this entire day, there hadn’t been a single person who called out to her in this form. It was probably an abnormal situation.

“Yes.”

Aeneas swallowed loudly.

“It is about the matter concerning Neisan.”

“.....Neisan?”

“Perhaps Lady Celiastina does not remember this. This is about the soldier who acted with impoliteness towards Lady Celiastina previously and was sent to the Holy Jail.”

Holy Jail? Those were words that she had never heard of before. Yuna furrowed her brows, wondering what it was, but that expression must have come off as being displeased to Aeneas. The faint sweat on his brow became a drop that slid down his cheek. But, even still, he didn’t avert his eyes.

“As you are the wise Lady Celiastina, you must already be aware of what I am about to request but allow me to dare say– Please, I beg of you, grant Neisan your forgiveness. Please, permit me to release him from the dungeon.”

“Dungeon...?”

Yuna vaguely began to understand the situation. And, at the same time, her fingers suddenly became cold.

“Lady Celiastina, I’ve turned to you before for Neisan. You told me that if he could endure being in the Holy Jail for three months then you would grant him your mercy. It has already been four months since Neisan has entered the Holy Jail. He has endured it. Please, as you’ve stated, I beg of you to grant him your forgiveness.”

Saying that, Aeneas lowered his head to the ground.

At once the chill from her fingers went up her spine. His words were too shocking. The more she assimilated his words the more she began to recall distinctly the merciless treatment that Celiastina of the past had done– her vision went white. It can’t be. No way. The misdeeds that Celiastina were guilty of exceeded her imagination vastly.

“I... ordered for Neisan... to be transferred to the dungeon, didn’t I.”

Yuna said this in a hoarse voice; she needed to confirm this firmly.

Aeneas raised his face and nodded weakly.

This happened four months ago. Furthermore, the promised period of three months had passed, which meant that Neisan had been left as he was there.

“Neisan... what did he do to me? Do you know?”

“Yes, he...”

“Could you tell me?”

“.....Four months ago, Neisan and I received orders to guard Lady Celiastina personally, and so we came to greet our lady. On that occasion, um, Lady Celiastina, you..... called out to me, especially.”

Aeneas suddenly became evasive and started speaking ambiguously. But Yuna managed to somehow understand what he wanted to say.

“Right, I was interested in you. And then?”

“At that time, I had a fiancée that had been decided by my family. Because of that, I could not... accept Lady Celiastina’s..... words.”

In other words, he had been the target of a seduction but refused that invitation.

“Right.”

“Neisan knew the circumstances and proposed to be my replacement to Lady Celiastina.”

“Right.”

“That... was an unforgiveable proposal from someone such as a squire.”

“.....”

That was it? It was just that? Just because of that, Celiastina had a person called Neisan tossed into jail? Her cold body began to grow hot. At the same time, her heart quickened.



Yuna closed her eyes and told herself repeatedly to calm down.

“–Aeneas.”

When she opened her eyes again, she directly met Aeneas’ eyes.

“Will you guide me to the Holy Jail?”

“What?”

Those words must have been unexpected, because Aeneas’ mouth dropped open and he lost his voice. The soldiers who had been watching the development of these events also widened their eyes.

“But, the dungeon of the royal palace, is not a place suited for someone like Lady Celiastina to go...”

“Please.”

Yuna said this strongly and so Aeneas, while still being somewhat bewildered, acknowledged her words.

“We’re leaving right away. Now, please stand.”

At her words, Aeneas staggered to his feet. He most likely came here with the resolve that this time he would be the one ordered to jail. When he realized he wasn’t going to be threatened, he seemed somewhat astonished. Moreover, he extended a hand to Yuna who had been getting out of bed with the proprieties of a knight. Just now, he said his comrade, Neisan, was a “squire”. It was probable that he had the same position. From his actions too, she wouldn’t have thought of him as an ordinary soldier who didn’t know etiquette. The town soldiers that Yuna knew were all sociable and frank people. They may have slapped each other’s shoulders familiarly but she couldn’t imagine them extending a hand. But then, right now, why was he wearing the clothes of a soldier? Most likely, when the events of four months ago happened, Celiastina also ordered his status to be revoked.

“What are you all going to do? If there are things you wish to say then I will listen to everything.”

Yuna looked to the other soldiers who were still standing there. Upon receiving her

look, their bodies which had relaxed immediately stiffened; they looked at each other with confused faces, but soon shook their heads timidly.

“If that’s the case, then would you all return to your stations for this evening? I absolutely won’t do anything bad to Aeneas. If you are worried about him then I can promise that much, so please be at ease.”

When they heard those words, their expressions became relieved to some degree. However, they couldn’t bring themselves to completely trust Celiastina and threw worried looks at Aeneas before bowing their head scatteredly and, though they still had hesitations, they soon left in uncertainty.

–It is impossible to return your deeds up until now back to nothing. Asyut’s words were brought back to her mind. Yuna bit her lip and left her room.

†

In the royal palace, where the evening was deepening and there were few people, the sight of the two of them was conspicuous. Each time the occasional servant passed by they would take a quick look at both of them with a surprised expression. A soldier and a saint. From the outside, it was certainly a strange combination. If they were going by the expression of Aeneas, who was walking in front with a scared look, they probably suspected some sort of misfortune befell him. However, his actual expression was more akin to bafflement than fear. From time to time, the look on his face when he turned his head to confirm that Yuna was coming along seemed to ask “Are you serious?”. Yuna didn’t say anything in particular, she just followed after Aeneas in silence.

The glamorous interior of the royal palace changed dramatically at night; the night brought about an indescribable illusionary atmosphere. The numerous decorations on the ceiling, made diligently by rare artists, and the delicate carvings on all the pillars were wholly concealed in the darkness. Instead, the light from the candle that reached the walls and their feet wrapped dimly around this space.

“Please watch your footing.”

Yuna took Aeneas’ hand and slowly descended the stairs of a spiral staircase.

“Are you absolutely certain about this?”

Suddenly, Aeneas' spoke up and asked this question. When Yuna nodded, he turned to face forward again in resignation, and it was as if he had never asked this question at all.

And then, at that time, the atmosphere in the area changed abruptly. The atmosphere—no, even her visuals, changed entirely and distinctly. The elegantly designed spiral staircase, within one step, changed without warning to stone stairs covered in dust. There was no divide or anything. The marble stairs that she had been stepping on had just, in the next step, disappeared and changed into plain stone steps that had not been polished. The path to the prison was clearly displayed.

Even though the beautiful royal palace was right there if they turned around, right now, Yuna was certain that she was stepping into the entrance of despair. Putting one hand on the hard and cold stone wall that appeared suddenly, and descending down the stairs that had bad footholds, Yuna was filled with uneasiness. Even though she came all this way to confirm precisely what Celiastina had done, perhaps this decision was too dreadful for this body. Unconsciously, she tightened her grip on Aeneas' hand. Aeneas', who felt that, sent a glance at Yuna. But the silence remained protected; the only sounds were the echoes of their shoes.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, there was a towering flat stone wall in front of them. A narrow passage continued to their right. And, coming from that side, faint ghastly groans, "Ahh... ahh...", resounded.

Yuna swallowed, hard.

"...You are certain?"

Aeneas confirmed at this last moment.

She couldn't draw back at this point. Once more, Yuna gave a firm nod.

When they passed through the narrow passage, what lay ahead of them were more narrow and complicated passages which only allowed one person to pass through. There were many walls of mortar in a row, limiting their visibility. There was barely any light and this damp and clammy space only made Yuna more depressed. And it was cold. A cold that could not even be expressed with the word cold. Yuna rewound the stole around her body slightly firmer, but even so, her freezing body trembled.

She continued walking slowly, following after Aeneas who was advancing with a lamp

in hand. Every time she took a step, there was an indescribable smell which became stronger. It was like the stench of something rotting. A stench of sweat, dust, and moisture mixed together. And– most likely, the stench of blood. All of those things were mixed together and pierced her nose sharply. Yuna reflexively grimaced.

As the passage slightly opened up, prison bars appeared on both sides. Fearfully, she turned her eyes in those directions but, contrary to her expectations, there was no one there, only a gapingly empty room. But there was something like a darkish malice that seemed to swirl there, and Yuna was unable to feel relieved at it being uninhabited.

The faint groaning sounds of prisoners steadily grew louder. And, as if it were covering up those voices, the sound of heavy clothing being rustled followed lowly. In the next moment, CLANG, there were the sounds of prison bars being shaken, and that high-pitched sound tore at her ears.

She reached her limit.

She felt like she realized more than enough. Yes, Celiastina had done something unspeakably heartless. Because she was able to force unconcerned people into this world without any light of day reaching them. Without any just reason. Justice? No, on the contrary, it was with unjust reasons.

Without realizing it, Yuna stopped. Both of her legs were trembling, and she couldn't walk well. Aeneas, who turned around, immediately came to her side with his brows furrowed.

“Lady Celiastina, this is enough. You do not need to look at a place like this. I am merely asking for your forgiveness.”

When she raised her frightened face, she met his eyes which were filled with compassion.

“.....Why.”

Her trembling voice unintentionally leaked out.

“Why do you have such a kind expression?”

Aeneas' eyes widened lightly, questioningly.

“You hate me, don’t you? I forced your friend unjustly into this place. And it wasn’t even a fight you picked. You yourself also must have suffered. In truth, you want to throw me into this dungeon, right? And yet, why, how are you able to look at this who is frightened at the entrance to this prison with such compassion?”

“Lady Celiastina, I’m not–“

“–let’s go. To meet Neisan.”

He must have been a person who, by nature, couldn’t hate someone. Receiving that kindness and concern in a place like this, instead just made Yuna irritated. She could also feel an irritation from that “other” slowly growing larger. But still, his concern strengthened her. When she resumed walking and almost passed the confused Aeneas, he hurried to catch up to her side.

Their path became even more complex.

There were prisons lined up in disordered spots, and were uninhabited. But there remained clear evidence that, in the past, people used to be there. What did that mean? Were the prisoners safely released? Or were they...

“Uuurghh.....”

A low groan was heard right beside them and Yuna’s shoulders trembled with a start. When she turned, the gloomy cell that she had thought was empty had a shadow that moved. When she resolved to move closer, a stink assaulted her to the point of making her want to reflexively draw back. But even so, she managed to walk up to the bars and was able to faintly catch sight of the man who was stirring inside.

The man was strangely emaciated. His wavy black hair was greasy and was stuck closely against his cheeks; those cheeks were completely hollow and had a color like dirt. Because he was looking down she wasn’t able to catch his expression, but that might have been better for Yuna.

Both the man’s feet and hands were forcibly brought together and bound. Due to that, the man’s body was curled unnaturally over his knees and, occasionally, he would just groan. He didn’t look over at them. Beside him, there was a dish with rotten food that was rolled over. Most of its contents had spilled out, but it was strangely covered.

“Lady Celiastina, please, this way.”

Aeneas grabbed Yuna's arm as if in reproach when she stood there unmoving and staring at the state of that man. Unable to resist, she was pulled away from that prison cell.

"H-How cruel..."

Yuna mumbled this instinctively. It was like that prisoner hadn't been treated as a person. Not only was he not given proper food, but it was clear that he had been tortured.

"It would be better if you did not look too closely."

Aeneas led Yuna, doing his best to avoid the direction in which groans and jarring noises were heard. Even so, there were a number of prisoners covered in despair and stagnating. She could tell with a glance that any one of the prisoners had received horrible treatment. There were also rooms where the entire floor and walls were covered in traces of blood. –She didn't want to imagine what had occurred there.

The circumstances around her were so gruesome that it felt like she had become completely numb. But still, the only thing she didn't want to do was avert her eyes from this reality, and so she continued determinedly to look at the sights in front of her. She was here in this place right now to find out what Celiastina had brought about to these people.

"Goddammit, dammit!"

"LET ME OUT, LET ME OUT FROM HERE!"

There were shouts and the shaking of bars from those who still had the energy and physical strength. But there were also many who had no energy to stand and were collapsed on the floor, as if they were dead.

There was one person to the side of Yuna and Aeneas who stood in front of the bars. The prisoner was looking down and seemed to be mumbling something. He noticed Yuna and stretched out his hand clumsily. Yuna approached him, as if drawn, but was stopped again by Aeneas.

"Lady Celiastina, please do not approach them. It is dangerous."

Yuna came to her senses, but behind her another man called out.

“Celiastina, you said? Hey, are you there?! HEY!!”

It was a young voice.

“What happened to my wife, Rin? Hey, what happened to Rin!? I beg of you, I don’t care what happens to me, but please save Rin!! Celiastina, you’re listening, aren’t you!?”

“Ah.....”

She couldn’t see the owner of that voice. It was a shout that came from one of the many prisons. Yuna, who took a step to find the source, had her arm gripped tightly by Aeneas. Her stole, which had been wrapped around her, slipped and slid off her shoulders.

“You mustn’t. You must realize how dangerous it is to face them in this place, right?”

“That’s true, but...”

“In any case, let us move with haste.”

She moved forward steadily with her hand pulled along by Aeneas. Just how long had they been walking since they entered this separate place? Most likely, as far as distance went, it wasn’t anything significant. But to Yuna it seemed like this passage would continue without end until, suddenly, it came to an end with just a few words from Aeneas.

“He is... Neisan.”

Finally arriving at their objective, this prison cell wasn’t any different from the others, it was just as gloomy and filled with an offensive smell. When she looked inside, there was a red-haired man reclined against the wall with both his legs stretched out. From his unmoving state and closed eyes, she had fears that he was already... but then she saw his chest moving up and down faintly and was able to know that he was still alive. Yuna heaved a sigh of relief.

He was also emaciated and his hair, which went past his shoulders, was wild and unkempt. The upper half of his body was not covered by clothes and instead was littered with wounds. There was nothing inside this empty cell except his body, and he was unconscious.

Aeneas confirmed that Neisan was unconscious before he brought Yuna up to the prison bars.

“I heard that Neisan survived every torture. It is likely that your words about it being three months somehow bolstered him.”

Aeneas muttered this while directing pained eyes at his friend.

“Normally, those who are sent to the Holy Jail do not survive past one month. There were those who did not have the strength, and those who could not preserve their spirits. In actuality, I do not know of anyone who has exited this place alive. But I believe Lady Celiastina is more than aware of this. Amongst that, Neisan has survived four months.”

Aeneas bit his lip.

“Lady Celiastina, please have mercy. Please grant Neisan your forgiveness. If possible, not just Neisan, please grant your mercy to all those who are here.....!”

There were tears mixed in at the end of his speech before Aeneas lowered himself to one knee, as if he were offering a prayer to Yuna.

“-STOP!!”

Yuna shouted in a bitter voice. At that moment, the dungeon was wrapped in a uproarious atmosphere. The prisoners became agitated and started rioting.

In the midst of this ghastly cacophony, Yuna somehow continued her words while trembling.

“I am not a person who you should be begging mercy from like that. I don’t have those qualifications. A saint..... I’m nothing like that.”

“Lady Celiastina.....”

“Aeneas... -Aeneas.”

The answer to the question she was about to ask was possibly going to knock her down completely. But she could not and would not avert her eyes from reality. Something, a sense of purpose or a sense of duty, or a slightly different resolve, moved



Yuna.

“This dungeon... is a bit too unnatural, isn't it?”

Yuna looked straight at Aeneas.

“It's too close to the royal palace. Moreover, there isn't a single guard at the entrance. If this was the kingdom's prison, they normally wouldn't torture prisoners in such a way. Even if you looked at everyone's behaviour–”

Yuna clenched her hands into fists.

“–not just Neisan. Everyone in here... was confined by my orders, right?”

She didn't want to realize that. But she did.

This Holy Jail was surely a place made on Saint Celiastina's whim. In order to torment innocent and guiltless people, and to make them suffer.

“.....Why... are you asking that, at this point?”

A very clear answer came back.

I see.

So that's how it was.

Suddenly, as if she felt something covering her shoulders, Yuna crumbled down. This heavy and loaded space was a whirlpool of malice towards her. The low echoing groans of the prisoners were voices of hatred towards her. –Aah, Celiastina, how terrible you are.

Once more, Yuna slowly looked around the area. She had to burn this sight into her heart so that she wouldn't forget. This space... was the darkness of Celiastina's heart.

“Lady Celiastina?”

“.....right.”

Yuna slowly nodded.

“Let’s return, Aeneas.”

“B-But–“

“Of course Neisan will be released. Not just him, but everyone else too. And then we’ll destroy this place so that, never again, will there be people trapped in here.”

As Yuna was saying this, before she knew it, she was shedding large tears. Even though she hadn’t intended to cry. But she couldn’t stop. What use did her crying have? Rather, these easy tears, would be the dirtiest thing to these innocent prisoners.

“Hurry, someone needs to be called. I can’t, save everyone, alone. I’m the one, who made them, suffer through this. Hurry, get them out, wipe off their bodies, give them something to drink, treat their wounds, let them sleep in warm beds– ahh.....”

Unstoppable tears. A small swirl of hatred in her chest began to well up, as if hating her tears.

Why, Yuna asked. Why are you angry? What are you so torn over?

“Lady Celiastina.....”

Aeneas hesitatingly stretched out a hand and gently wiped away the tears sliding down Yuna’s cheeks. Don’t be so kind to me, Yuna screamed in her heart. — Yes, that person — he should be looking at her with hate in his eyes like Asyut. But, contrary to those feelings, Yuna was unable to refuse Aeneas’ warm hand.

Neisan, who at some point had regained consciousness, stared over at them with a strange look in his eyes.

Even when his look was caught by Yuna, he didn’t look away or glare. She couldn’t read any sort of emotion in those exhausted eyes.

## Chapter Four

Rap, rap, rap.

At the sudden sound of unreserved knocks, Linus raised his eyes from his book.

Who was the idiot who was violently knocking on his door this late at night? When he went to open the door with an unhappy expression, there stood Celiastina with an even more complicated and sullen expression than him. Behind her was a blond-haired young man that he had the memory of seeing somewhere before.

“Is something the matter? Coming here at this time...”

“I’m sorry, but I couldn’t think of anyone else to ask help from.”

The young girl in front of him appeared to be even more worked up than the time he spoke to her this morning.

“It’s about the Holy Jail.”

Linus was considerably surprised to hear that word from her mouth.

“Of course, you know about it, right?”

Certainly, there was no way he didn’t know about it. But, more importantly, it was surprising that the young girl already knew about it. –He didn’t think she would learn about it this fast. He had thought that she would learn about it one day, and that it would be something to think about in the future.

“Well, at any rate, do come in.”

He showed in the young girl and the young man behind her and let them sit on a couch. Even though the couch was soft, the two of them looked quite uncomfortable. It was probably due to their impatience not allowing them to relax at a time like this.

“I want to release everyone who is trapped in that dungeon.”

As if she couldn't wait, the young girl quickly brought up the issue at hand.

"That is quite sudden."

"I know, but this needs to happen as quick as possible. Even tonight."

"And you're saying this to someone like me..."

The young girl drew back and frowned, looking clearly frustrated.

"If it is no use speaking to you, then please point me to someone I can speak to."

"Oh? You're much more confident than you were this morning."

Linus chuckled with amusement.

"You should be more than aware of this by now, right? I am a hopelessly selfish and disobedient saint."

"Certainly."

Linus smiled wryly before he scrawled something on the paper beside him and rang a bell beside his hand. He entrusted the paper to a servant, who appeared shortly, and told them that it was an urgent message for the deputy prime minister; the servant gave a small nod before leaving immediately from the room. Linus decided that if he sent a message to the deputy prime minister then everything would be handled well since the deputy prime minister had been adverse to the existence of the Holy Jail previously.

".....Is everything going to be okay with that?"

"Please be at ease. If you've said you've forgiven something then, with just that one word, even a nefarious person who murdered our king would become innocent."

Hearing that, the young girl sunk into silence with a complicated expression.

"Now then."

Linus exhaled and then looked at the two people in front of him, alternating between them.

“Celia, was it the young man beside you who brought up talk of the Holy Jail?”

When he asked, the blond-haired young man’s body stiffened slightly. And, as if defending that person, the young girl hurriedly answered.

“If he did, is there something wrong with that?”

“No, there’s nothing wrong. If he did, I was just thinking on how he’s quite a courageous lad. Everyone knew about the existence of the Holy Jail, but there was an unspoken agreement not to talk about it. To say nothing of talking about it openly in front of you, Celia.”

“Aeneas did nothing wrong.”

“.....I acted deliberately, knowing how impolite I was. I am prepared to accept any kind of punishment.”

The young man called Aeneas expressed this in a grave tone. While listening to his words, Linus dropped his gaze.

“.....Did you take Celia along with you... to the dungeon?”

“Why are you asking about that?”

The young girl must have sensed the criticism in Linus’ voice, because she defended Aeneas once again.

“An unclean place such as that is not a place where the saint should step into. You understand that much, don’t you?”

“Even though that unclean place was made by that very same saint?”

The young girl declared flatly before glaring at him.

–This strong side of her was also more than he expected. In his heart, Linus secretly admired her. His impression from the morning was that she was an honest and obedient, but unreliable, young girl. Which he didn’t mind. But, for some reason, he had a preference for the confidence she was showing now. She was quite an interesting young girl. From the slightly dirty dust and dirt covered one-piece dress she was wearing, it was unmistakable that she went to the Holy Jail. However, he decided to

stop pressing that question. His interest was drawn even more if, upon looking at that place, she started to act firm like this.

“In any case, it was not my intention to find fault with the acts of our free and uncontrolled Lady Saint.”

“Haven’t you already nitpicked me?”

“Anyway, the night is already late today. The matter of the Holy Jail will definitely be dealt with in a way that satisfies you, so please return to your room and sleep. Aeneas, you too. Accompanying this selfish saint must have worn out your nerves considerably. You must also have duties tomorrow and if you don’t hurry and rest your body now then you will become impeded.”

He gently announced a closing to their meeting, however, the young girl seemed reluctant.

“But I need to confirm that everyone who was trapped is safely released.”

“Didn’t I say I would take responsibility? Am I that untrustable?”

His answer came back in the form of suspicious eyes which seemed to say that he was not believable. In truth, he was interested in how exactly, in this one day, the girl decided to appraise him.

“Come now, if these people who were finally freed were to see you waiting for them, would it not be sad to have them be terrified again? At any rate, you will return to your room. Alright?”

If he said it like that then the young girl could not strongly oppose that. She closed her mouth and swallowed her words, though she looked like she wanted to say something still. Emulating Linus, who stood up from his seat now that they’re meeting was over, the young girl and Aeneas also stood up. Linus pressed a hand against the girl’s back and she walked obediently to the door.

“Lady Celiastina, I will escort you to your room.”

Without a moment’s delay, Aeneas lowered his head politely and took Celiastina’s pale hand. Linus finally remembered the young man upon seeing this refined move; him and the red-haired young man together with him.

The two of them were young nobles who should have had a promising future. But, due to Celiastina's playing, their futures were brutally pushed down to the very bottom. The red-haired young man, even now, was locked away in the aforementioned prison and hanging around life and death. This lad, called Aeneas, lost his fiancée, position as a squire, his open future, and he even nearly lost his one and only close friend for an eternity. That being the case, then shouldn't the girl in front of him have become the target of his hatred, to the point of wanting to get his hands on her? And yet, unexpectedly, he was quite calmly displaying a chivalrous spirit, Linus thought as he peered at the young man with curiosity.

He could not see even a little bit of hatred in those eyes. Instead, those clear eyes were showing a gaze one would look upon a beloved master with. Oh my, Linus raised an eyebrow.

Is this boy sane, or is he planning something? In any case, it seemed like there were considerably deep developments that happened in a place of which he could not be a part of. It might have been a mistake to have continued to leave Celiastina all alone and, unusually, Linus felt some light regret at his own actions. It wasn't interesting for him to be the only one left outside of this event.

“-Celia.”

Linus called out to the saint, who was leaving the room along with Aeneas. What? The girl seemed to say with her eyes when she turned to look up at him, but he just dropped a quick kiss against her forehead. Immediately, the girl's face became red. To think that the day would come where he could see with his own eyes Saint Celiastina become flustered like a simple girl. Linus chuckled.

“It's a goodnight kiss... it looks like it has some sort of startling effect. Oh, I just had a good idea. Starting tomorrow, each time you use polite language to me, I will kiss you once like I did just now. How about that? I wonder how many times it'll happen in one day?”

“W-w-w-what kind of utter nonsense are you saying!?”

Beside the shouting young girl, Aeneas had a difficult expression. Linus snickered to himself as he thought on how Aeneas was quite interesting as well.

“Oh my, Aeneas, you look displeased or that you have an objection. Ah, I know, I should

give you a goodnight kiss as well, right?"

Aeneas stiffened and his expression looked as if he wanted to ask Linus what he was talking about but...

".....No, thank you."

After a moment of silence, all Aeneas did was mutter that with a scandalized look.

†

That night, Yuna couldn't fall asleep.

Whenever she closed her eyes, the dreadful scenes of the prison would vividly come to mind. Dragged into that crazy world, Yuna suffered alone. She could hardly believe that right now she was lying down in the bed of her luxurious room; she felt like she was still in that dark dungeon and hearing the pained voices of the prisoners.

Why did Celiastina create something like the Holy Jail? Was she really content to torment all those people there? Did she not have any regrets? Did she ever not think to stop it?

–But no answers appeared to her questions. Especially the “other’s” feelings that rise up like waves, she couldn't feel it at all right now. Celiastina was completely silent.

Yuna opened her eyes slowly.

That mysterious light had said that one day Celiastina's soul would be returned. Until that time arrived, she had thought she was to play the role assigned to her “as Celiastina” and maintain this body without causing suspicion in the people around her, but...

Was that really all she should do?

As time passed and Celiastina's soul came back, would she continue on committing those inhuman deeds up to now without any change? If so, what was the reason to restore that girl once again?

(Celiastina, what exactly do you want to do?)



Once more, Yuna asked a question, but as she thought there was no answer.

All that happened was the passage of the long night.

Yuna watched the spreading darkness for a long time, wondering at what time the dawn would come.

†

The next morning had pleasant weather. There was nary a cloud and the blue skies were refreshing.

Yuna slowly sat up in her bed and her eyes followed the maid that was opening the window to let the wind in. For an instant, she felt like everything that had happened a few hours ago was just a nightmare. But the ghastly smell that still lingered deep in her nose wouldn't let her forget the reality.

"Good morning, Lady Celiastina."

As expected, the maid delivered a businesslike morning greeting.

Yuna quietly lowered her weary eyes, and there was no one anywhere to notice her state. Soon, two maids arrived to change her clothes and they appeared all the more relieved when they saw that Yuna was silent. She could read in their thoughts that they had found the things she said yesterday to be unbearable.

After she changed and finished her breakfast alone, she went to Linus' room the same as she did yesterday.

"Morning, Celia. Did you sleep properly last night?"

Yuna silently shook her head.

"That's no good. It was surely because you're so serious and brooded over quite a few things."

"Hey, Linus, has the matter with the Holy Jail really been handled properly?"

"Of course. I never make a blunder."

“The people who were imprisoned... are there any in life-threatening conditions?”

“Well, there are those in precarious states. But if you’re just talking about their lives then I was told that everyone is safe.”

“.....there are people whose spirits were broken, huh. And there must be people who have become disabled too.”

“However, Celia, it’s not something to have such a bleak look. If you hadn’t pardoned those people yesterday then not one of those people there would have been saved.”

“But...”

“It’s best that you don’t identify yourself with Celiastina too much. Listen, because you are not Celiastina.”

“But right now I am Celiastina.”

Linus frowned slightly as he looked at Yuna, who muttered this like a spell. But that was just for a moment, he immediately regained his usual calm expression, and then gave a small shake of his head.

Linus approached the young girl, who was leaning towards the window, and gently embraced her delicate body.

“It looks like you’re somewhat depressed. Let me comfort you.”

“Ack! –I-I don’t need that kind of weird kindness!”

“At any rate, you’re surprisingly intelligent. Last night, since I promised “that”, you seem to have come to a complete stop in using polite language.”

“W-what are you talking about?”

“It’s alright, you know? You don’t have to force yourself to use informal language.”

“Geez! Stop joking and let me go!”

“Oh my, how heartless. Just a few days ago, it was an everyday occurrence for Celia and I to exchange hugs, though? To reject me now isn’t like you, Celiastina.”

Inside the widely smiling Linus' arms, Yuna turned red and struggled.

"I was right! You two have a shady relationship....."

"Come now, stop resisting already. –And stop being sad too."

For a moment, Yuna quieted down, but then she suddenly came back to her senses and used both hands to force his arms back.

"N-now's not the time for me to be doing such dumb things."

"That's rude, calling this a dumb thing."

"Linus, take me to where all the people who were imprisoned are. I want to see how they're doing."

In the moment she said that, a stern look appeared in Linus' eyes.

"That is not possible."

"Why?"

"You might be someone different inside but your outward appearance is that of Celiastina. It wouldn't be good for you to appear in front of those who were harmed by Celiastina..... which is something I'm sure I said yesterday."

"But–"

"It would be a huge shock to them. There is also a fear that they could cause harm to you. Those who were driven insane might rush to attack you, the source of everything, when they see you."

Even being told that though Yuna could not accept this.

"Ah, just in time, I thought to talk about this matter. To be honest, amongst the people who were released yesterday, there are those who are terribly agitated. For the time being they are being watched under the pretense of being nursed, but this is just in case. I would like you to remain obediently in your room for a short while until the situation has calmed."

“.....By that you mean hiding?”

“That’s right.”

Linus declared this without hesitation.

“I don’t want to! I saw those people suffering with my own eyes! I can’t just ignore that!”

“Please stop making me repeat this. To those people your presence itself is like a poison. There are those who would lose their mind just seeing your face. It’s not just a matter of you going there.”

Refused so bluntly and coldly, Yuna could do nothing but lower her eyes.

“What would you even do when you’re there? You are C-e-l-i-a, no? Doing anything with Celia’s appearance like that will just be taken as an act of deception and betrayal, won’t it?”

“.....That’s...”

Yuna wasn’t able to respond.

Linus gave a single nod as he looked at Yuna, who kept silent.

“Then, now that you’re calm, we should head to the Ceremony of Worship. This is a rare ceremony where all the important people gather, so it is best not to be absent. Once this ceremony is over, return immediately to your room, understood?”

†

The atmosphere in the Ceremony of Worship’s room was very similar to that of the church in Yuna’s village, and she was able to relax to some extent.

It was a welcomed ceremony to Yuna because she didn’t have to do anything within herself and could just listen to the words of blessing from the head priest and offer up prayers to God. However, due to her position, there was a special seat prepared for her in the front row. At the time she noticed that she was dumbfounded, but it was about time she became accustomed to that kind of treatment.

The seats, around 50 people, were mostly filled already with high-ranking nobles of the country. Afterwards, she just needed to walk to her designated seat in a dignified manner. It gave her the feeling of being an actor on the verge of entering from the offstage onto the front stage. Actually, this room of worship was built like a theatre and Yuna was to enter from the wings.

Yuna sucked in a breath and then took a step. The moment she did, she saw a human shape step out just like her from the opposite wing, and she reflexively felt her body stiffen. There stood Asyut, with his unchanging look of dissatisfaction. Yuna was filled with the desire to turn her back on him but somehow she managed to straighten her back and arrive at her seat. Now that she looked, she could see that it was a seat for two people. While feeling disgusted at herself for just noticing that now, Yuna kneeled and assumed a praying position at that seat. Asyut, who was already beside her, kneeled in the same way. It looks like it was just this ceremony which required the saint and First Holy Knight to attend together.

Yuna secretly took a peek at Asyut, but the other didn't spare her a glance and only stared straight at the altar. Yuna sighed inwardly at how indifferent he was, as usual.

.....If possible, she would have liked to tell him this. That she had ascertained the faults of Celiastina with her own eyes. That she wasn't saying this to ask for his forgiveness. But that she's saying this to let him know that she won't run away. She won't try to turn it to nothing, like it never happened. That she would face it properly– this reality.

Yuna returned her line of sight to her hands. They were Celiastina's beautiful hands, pale without a single scratch. Now that she looked at them under the light of the sun, she could see that it was completely different from her own rough and scratched hands. She gently clenched those hands. –Right now, these hands were moving firmly under her will, as Yuna. She was Yuna, but at the same time she was also Celiastina. She felt this once again.

Suddenly, there was a commotion from the wings of the altar that tickled at Yuna's ears. When she raised her head and looked over there, she saw several soldiers stand in what looked like a circle and whisper to one another. One of the soldiers pointed at the ground and shook his head. At their feet was a black lump– ah, it was a poisonous bug. The same type of poisonous bug that she saw during that time at the river; the one that, when she first woke up as Celiastina, she instinctively brushed off because it was crawling on her knee. Even the royal palace had these poisonous bugs? Yuna watched them idly.

Come to think of it, she was reminded of a story that she heard from her father a long time ago. A story about a boy who woke up and realized he became a poisonous insect. One morning, he woke up and became a poisonous bug that everyone detested– it was just like her right now, Yuna thought. What happened to the boy in the story at the very end? Did he regain his original form again? Or did he.....

The soldiers exchanged a few more words after that but, shortly, one of them crushed the poisonous bug underfoot. The foot, which was lowered without hesitation, stole that bug's life all too quick.

(They killed it.)

An unpleasant feeling gradually spread inside Yuna. Certainly, the insect had carried poison but wasn't it also something that held a life? Were none of those soldiers conscious of that? If it had been Yuna's father, he surely wouldn't have killed it and would have returned it to some dirt. Even if it was poisonous, so long as it wasn't provoked then it wouldn't have attacked anyone.

(It is easy to kill living things in this place, isn't it.....)

Eventually, the overture music began to flow. Yuna closed her eyes and lost herself to that music.

†

It was obvious, but when the Ceremony of Worship finished, the room of worship which had emptied out became completely and utterly silent.

Yuna was allowed to remain behind alone after she asked a reluctant Linus. She wrapped the remains of the bug, which had lost its life just moments ago, in a handkerchief and buried it behind the building. She felt like she had to do that.

(Though it's not like that had any meaning.)

When she looked up quietly at the high, high ceiling, she could see many drawn celestial figures, who were dancing about with grace.

(.....O' God, Vida.)

This time Yuna was alone when she kneeled once more and prayed secretly to God.

(Please hear my prayers. After my own life had come to an end, I was entrusted with a new life for the time being. And I was convinced that I couldn't let anyone realize that this saint's body had passed away. Yes, I thought that I would pass the time in the same way that the past Lady Celiastina did until, one day, the past Lady Celiastina was returned to her body.)

–But.

(Is that really all I should do? Inherit this heinous and feared heart of Lady Celiastina, and then once again hand it over like that? What would be the meaning of that, is what this foolish girl spent all night last night being troubled over. And I haven't found an answer to that. But, I realized in the end that no matter what I can't just inherit everything and leave it like this. Moreover–)

Yuna suddenly raised her head.

(I suspect that Lady Celiastina too does not wish for that. Why did the Lady Saint end her own life? When a person ends their own life, it is at a time when they earnestly wish to end everything. Surely, Lady Celiastina herself had those thoughts. Because she terribly detested herself and her heart, and those deeds committed by following that heart. And so surely, isn't it because she wanted to forsake herself that she did such a reckless action like committing suicide? –No, I am saying this as if I know the truth, but I am fully aware that there's no way currently for me to understand everything. But, that's why I'm saying this, I don't want to leave things to their natural course in ignorance. I am nothing but an average village girl, and even now that fundamental has not changed. But I want to spend this life, entrusted to me for just one year, on a path that I believe is right. I will make every effort for the sake of not erring on this path that I believe in. That's why, O' God, Vida.....)

Yuna squeezed her clasped hands tightly.

(Please watch over me. I am sure that my conviction will be likely to crumble many times, but even so I am who I am. Even if I've lost my past name, lost my body, and am already another person– my soul has not changed and is still me.)

She strongly, strongly prayed silently. So that her will would not waver.

And then Yuna quietly stood up and opened her eyes.

–At that moment, a gentle wind caressed her cheeks, and the sunlight shone in.



## Chapter Five

Afterwards, Linus immediately came to retrieve her and, as stated, Yuna spent several days in her room.

The large room was as wearisome as usual, but thanks to Linus' consideration there were several new things inside the tasteless room. There were various books, ranging from religious texts to the popular, arranged on her bookshelves, and a complete set of lacework placed casually on the table. Most of the books were difficult for Yuna and hard to read, and the lacework too was unmanageable for her since she didn't have experience in the aristocratic arts. Even so, she was grateful for Linus' thoughtfulness and expressed her thanks in her heart.

The room was provided with a private bathroom and, as long as food was brought in, she could live inside her room without any inconvenience. On this, she was grateful.

Yuna, who had been excused from every ceremony, quickly became bored though and looked around the room. After wandering around the room aimlessly, she looked at the mountain of books. Just looking at the spines made her feel overwhelmed but she managed to pull herself together and pull out one book.

It was a book on the history of this country and the saints. It wasn't something that was impossible to read but it would take a lot of time to decipher the words and it was a bothersome history book to understand for Yuna. However, it was precisely because of this that it was something she could use to pass the time, and she also wanted to know more about the relation between the saints and this country, so it was like killing two birds with one stone. She was lacking in too much knowledge.

(Ever since the long gone time of myths, there has always been the existence of a saint.)

By the time Yuna, who was carefully reading each page, sighed and reached a point in the book where the events were only 1000 years ago, the maids had brought in candles for light. While lifting a cup of brewed tea to her mouth, she found herself unexpectedly astonished at the "deep-rooted" history of the saints.

In the past, this country was just one of many countless countries that crowded

around this land. But, even at that time, it was known to the other countries that there was a saint who served Sibelius. The kingdom of Sibelius protected its saint from the other countries, sparing no effort. And then, one day, it came to have the power to overwhelm the other countries; it was written in the book that the other countries naturally surrendered to Sibelius when they understood the preciousness of the saint. And, about 1000 years ago from now, the world became unified under Sibelius and the other countries were left as vassals. However, even Yuna vaguely understood that, in the world of entangled interests and speculations, the conflict between all countries was not so easily settled. It was more likely that the present Sibelius was formed after a dark morass of exchanges.

Now then, more importantly, about the saints.

Yuna roused herself again and skipped past the political parts of the book until she reached the part referring to the saints, where she narrowed down her focus to continue reading the book.

The saints who appeared in this history book were all women who were sublimely beautiful, more than anyone, and like angels. Everyone was portrayed as a faultless saint and praised on how they served their country with their body and soul. Yuna had some doubts. She had only experienced a few days of living as a saint and she was already feeling tired. There had to be girls who couldn't endure the heavy pressure of a saint's duties being pushed onto them since they were young, right? Or did everyone just continue to exist as the ideal saint without a single complaint? It all seemed very suspicious, that was Yuna's honest impression.

But, well, there was that; it was no surprise that the previous generations of saints, from hundreds of years ago, were deified. Even if there were scandals here and there, no doubt the details of those stories would be omitted. But still, as she continued to read about these saints, she couldn't help but groan at how Celiastina was really a heretical saint. In these thousands years of histories, there was not a single appearance of a saint which had committed atrocious acts. No matter how the author of this book colored their evaluation of Celiastina, it was impossible for them to write down something like "she served the country with complete devotion".

(In that case, what about the saints from just a few generations ago?)

She turned over a large width of the book to look at the last few dozen pages. It looks like this book was made relatively recently because there were things written about

the previous saint– the saint before Celiastina! Yuna curbed her impatience and read the entry.

That saint was called Malveneska. It was a grand name, but it was said that she was a peasant. According to this book the women, upon becoming the saint, were bestowed with a name by the king. In other words, Celiastina's name was, strictly speaking, not her real name. Generally, the name of a saint contained similar characters to their original name but with a holy sound to it.

Malveneska was a brunette, with plentiful hair, and a beauty with a mysterious atmosphere. She had an obedient and silent personality, without many facial expressions, but she conducted her ceremonies without missing a single one and was a woman of deep piety. Each successive generation of saints held special powers, and in her case it appeared to be the ability to “sing well”. Compared to the power of clairvoyance in past saints, her power was quite plain but her singing was beautiful to a point of being heavenly and those who heard her voice were struck with such wonder that tears would flow down their cheeks. The book described exaggeratedly at how the First Holy Knight loved his fiancée so much from the bottom of his heart that he could not even wait for her to turn twenty to marry her.

The descriptions around Malveneska were around this amount. It looked like this book was written during her life and was published when she was still quite young. With this, Yuna was unable to know how Malveneska lived her life as the saint. Thinking that this was a shame, Yuna casually flipped to the next page. And then her eyes landed on a number. Yuna was so surprised to see Malveneska's birthday that her breath caught.

Adelbert 2. Wasn't that just forty years ago!? In other words, if she were still alive she would still be in her mid-forties. But Celiastina being here was proof that Malveneska no longer existed in this world. Yuna didn't know the exact age of Celiastina but, looking at her appearance, she was unmistakably around twenty years old give or take. If she used that for her calculations, then Malveneska died prematurely around the age of twenty. It is hard to think that she had an accidental death in this royal palace. Then, maybe she died from an illness?

(How sad.)

While thinking that, she couldn't feel anything more than sympathy. Perhaps it was because she was overlapping herself with Malveneska.

Yuna closed the book and looked up at the ceiling. –How much time was she allowed? She could only feel a sense of helplessness at the certain feeling of an imminent death. Malveneska might have lived as the saint while having these same thoughts. For what sake did she devote her prayers to as she approached death? For herself after her death? Or for the country that continues even after her death?

There was no doubt in her decision to move forward on the path she believed in. But there was another doubt that swirled in Yuna no matter what she did.

†

In the next few days, the room showed various changes. It was likely that, in the short time Yuna was bathing, the servants changed the things she had to pass the time with. The set of lacework that were on the table on the first day disappeared and were replaced by a beautiful painting set, and just by looking at it she could tell it was expensive. The flute-like instrument that she didn't understand was changed to a small music box, which made enchanting music.

They probably caught Yuna's lack of interest in those items; the things that were replaced were all things that Yuna hadn't touched much. At any rate, they must have thought that it would be bad for the saint to become bored. Most likely it wasn't done out of a feeling of "apology" but rather a "there will be trouble" meaning, Yuna thought with a self-derisive smile. And then she gave an empty sigh.

But it was hard for her to imagine that the servants used their own judgement to prepare this fine painting set and music box for her. Thinking that it might have been Linus' consideration for her again, she asked the maid who appeared to clean up her dinner.

But, surprisingly, when she did so the answer that was returned was "Those came from Lord Asyut's consideration". It looks like, from the start, Asyut was the one who ordered her maids to prepare these various items.

(.....I can't believe it.)

Considering the attitude he had when she had faced him, she had thought there was no way he would care about her sake. However, she didn't think the maids would lie about this. These various items were definitely prepared by Asyut.

(It's so pretty.)

Yuna picked up the music box again; it was inlaid with several gems and glittered.

(I wonder if I can be friends... with Asyut.)

Was that an impossible wish? Was it completely impossible to fill the deep trench that stretched between them?

(I want to become friends, huh.....)

Why did she think that way? If she had been a village girl, then something like being friends with a good-looking young man with both status and education like Asyut was such a grand thing that it wouldn't even be granted in her dreams. Much less wishing for a relationship that would be more than that. Besides, if by any chance, hypothetically speaking, she was able to become friends with Asyut then what awaited them was an inescapable separation. And yet, why did she...

(I might be starting to treat things through Celiastina's point of view, little by little.)

Linus had spoken about this before. He told her not to equate herself with Celiastina. It's true that Yuna thought the same. But, without her noticing, it became like this. Even though she knew intellectually that she was just increasing her own pain, the more she felt this world with these eyes, these hands, and these feet, the more she wasn't able to treat things like they were somebody else's problem.

Haa, she sighed, and then at the same moment she dropped her sight to the music box again the room echoed with the sound of a knock on her door.

Who could that be? The maids had just cleared away her dinner.

"Excuse me."

Yuna startled at that voice and then her body stiffened. It was the voice of the person she had just been thinking about. It was Asyut.

For some reason she felt awkward. As she tried to pick her words, Asyut opened the door and entered the room. When he noticed the music box in Yuna's hands, his eyes narrowed slightly. It was an expression that had no emotion.

“W-What is it? Did something happen?”

“No, I wondered if you were not feeling inconvenienced from being alone. Is there anything you feel you are lacking?”

“No, I’m fine in that respect but.....”

Did he come here out of his way to confirm that?

“T-Thank you very much.”

“That isn’t necessary. This is a part of my duties as well.”

In other words, he was implying that he came here unwillingly because it was his job. Yuna felt a little indignant but she somehow stifled that feeling.

“Um, how long am I supposed to be on standby in this room?”

“I believe it will only be a little while longer.”

“Amongst those who were released from the Holy Jail, there are those who really hate me, aren’t there? Of course, they still haven’t settled down, huh.”

“That is right.”

Asyut stated that without hesitation; there was an implication that she should know, since she had the memory of having done those things herself.

“The question is whether there is a possibility that hatred can lead to some kind of action. While watching over them, we are eliminating all of those possibilities.”

From the start, they never thought to soothe the feelings of the victims but acted in a way so that the victims would not act violently. Is that what he meant?

Each and every one of Asyut’s words were harsh. Feeling that sharply, Yuna curled her body inwards.

“And why is it just now that you’ve decided to talk about releasing everyone from the Holy Jail?”

Asyut muttered this while looking slightly downward. It was a quiet mutter, as if he were speaking to himself, but it reached Yuna's ears.

"I-I..... I've said that I've lost my memories but I don't want to close my eyes to the past."

Yuna stood up from the sofa and brought this up strongly. Yes, she thought, this was the only thing she wanted to tell him. Even if her other words didn't reach him, she just wanted these ones to do so.

Asyut, who looked surprised at Yuna's ferocity, widened his eyes slightly. While he stood there, unable to move in his confusion, she pressed on with her next words.

"Rather, I want to know about more things from now on. Not just myself, but the mistakes I am guilty of and the results that happened because of those. I know there is no meaning behind me reflecting on my past mistakes when I currently have no memories, but even so, I want to know. I want to confront the past me."

She wanted to confront Celiastina.

"The Holy Jail is one of those. I went to that jail and saw it with these eyes. The reality that I had brought about with my fickle orders. It was a horrible sight....."

"I've said this before, that no matter what you did your sins would not be forgiven."

"I know."

But, Yuna continued her words again.

"Is it hopeless to wish for one more chance to do things over again? Of course, my sins will not disappear for my entire life, and I think I will not be allowed to forget that. But, bearing those sins in mind, I want to walk forward once more, staring straight ahead, if that is possible."

If even that was not allowed then surely Celiastina would not return. There would be no place where Celiastina belonged.

"What are you saying... at this point..."

Asyut said evasively, as if he were being told a lie.

“You took away the lives of a great many people. The lives of those people won’t return no matter what you do. And yet, you’re saying you want to do things over again, when you’re the only one who can?”

It was painful to be told that. She did think his words were true. But Celiastina had ended her life once. She ended her life with her own hands, so that she would not even be able to choose the choice of redoing things. Still she could not die and that was because she was this world’s one and only “saint”.

(That must have been very painful, right, Celiastina?)

A dull pain ran deep in her chest. It was like there was another her who was crying.

It might be a selfish thought to want to redo things, but at the very least she did not want to abandon Celiastina, even if she was the only one.

“The saint cannot die.”

At those words, Asyut raised his face as if he were taken aback.

(That is why I am here. The very least I could do is–)

“I want to make the people I meet from here on happy. Asyut, you too.”

Yuna was terribly nervous as she said this. It was obvious that she would receive a strong backlash from Asyut.

“Happy?”

It was the expected cold voice.

“What is this happiness you speak of?”

It was a difficult question. Asyut’s happiness. What was it that she could do right now?

“.....For example, uh, we’re going to be married in the future, right? But, at this moment, it is something like torture to you, Asyut, right? So, maybe we can have a relationship that is a little calm when we’re together, or at the least not painful.”

“In the upper class, it is an everyday occurrence to have a political marriage of



convenience. It is not necessary to find any other meaning there.”

“I think it’s best to have pleasant days whether you are an aristocrat or royalty.”

“That would be nice, yes. If that was possible, that would be the best. But, even if that wasn’t doable, a marriage that must be done has to be done.”

“Are you saying you’ve already given up? But, wait, I’ll do my best. I will endeavour to understand your feelings, Asyut, even if it is just a little.”

“No, thank you. I believe such efforts will be in vain, even if you try. If you really want to do something, I would appreciate you making an effort not have anything to do with me.”

“That’s–“

Yuna lost her words.

“The marriage is merely for form’s sake. When you entered the royal palace, we exchanged vows at the engagement ceremony. And, at the age of twenty, we will perform the marriage ceremony. Once done, this country will continue its long peace. That is all.”

“I-I don’t like that way of thinking!”

“You might not be able to understand the thoughts of those who, from the time they were born, were raised and told on how things are to be done for the sake of the country.”

“I–“

“However, I too, cannot understand your way of thinking. After having done such things, why would you think you could be open and friendly with me?”

Yuna could not object to those words. Looking at him, she understood, even if she did not want too, that he was talking about something unforgivable that had been done. But what exactly did she do? She wanted to ask, but feeling Asyut’s strong rejection and how getting to the core of that was something he would definitely not allow, Yuna could only swallow her words.

“.....I apologize. I only intended to come and inquire about your circumstances.”

As if uncomfortable, Asyut suddenly averted his eyes. Yuna bit her lip when she saw that. –He had no intention of being friends with her. On the contrary, he had no intention of discussing anything with her. He had no intention of meeting her eyes. It was a complete rejection.

Asyut lowered his head politely and left the room.

“From the time they were born, they were raised and told on how things are to be done for the sake of the country.”

Once she was alone, Yuna turned over Asyut’s words in her mind over and over again, and then noticed something.

The responsibility he carried on his shoulders. That pressure. That crushing weight–.

Right now, Yuna knew very well the pain of being squeezed into a stereotype. One she couldn’t escape from, both as the saint and as Celiastina. It felt like she was gradually becoming faint and at the end she would disappear without even leaving a trace. Yuna wanted someone, even just one person, to see her. Not as anyone else but to look at her as “her”. On one hand she was trying her best as Celiastina but, on the other, she had these feelings as well.

Did Asyut cry out the same like this?

From the time he was born, he was set up as the First Holy Knight and raised like that. That pressure was unfathomable. Perhaps even the person himself didn’t know what he was like, stripped bare. Because the moment he wasn’t the First Holy Knight it would be like he didn’t exist.

She was sure that Asyut was excellent in meeting everyone’s expectations. His dignified appearance and firm personality was absolutely amazing. He possessed a light that those who stood at the top should have. There were even many times where rumors of the First Holy Knight reached Yuna’s ears when she was still a village girl. He was intelligent, he was skilled in swordsmanship, he supported the king well and was deeply trusted. His appearance was not like that of an ordinary person. But those were not just rumors. Even Yuna, whose association with him was still superficial, could understand that he was a great person.

But there was no way a perfect person like that existed.

(Yes, it's strange.)

It would have been better if she had noticed. A person should refuse and turn down things they dislike. Was she a child for thinking that way? In this world, could things not be as simple as that?

Even if that were the case, she believed it was wrong to have to accept the unreasonable pain of doing something like marrying a woman one hated from the bottom of his heart. It was as easy as saying "I don't want to". First, he should just try saying it. And, from there, something might even change.

A feeling similar to anger started to bubble and well up.

It might have been anger to herself. At herself for saying all kinds of things to people because of her rampant feelings but, at the end of the day, not being able to break down her situation. Yes, she was just being swept away. She was being swallowed by a violent current.

However, if she gave up here and now then it would be the same as giving up on everything in the future. Including the future of the sleeping and injured Celiastina. If she pushed on without giving up then maybe one day Celiastina would be able to face her past. It was the same for her. She wanted to be able to accept this moment some day as one where she could feel like this suffering was something that made her stronger.

—Even if, in the next moment, she would have to meet and accept the end of everything.

†

The following day, at tea time, a maid that Yuna had never met before appeared.

"My name is Nasha and I will be serving you starting from today, Lady Celiastina."

"I-It's a pleasure to meet you."

The girl called Nasha was still young, looking to be around the same age as Celiastina. Due to nervousness she didn't seem to move her body, and stood there upright without

moving an inch. Up to now Yuna hadn't had a person serving her full-time and so this was an unexpected encounter, but just being able to make a completely new acquaintance made her happy.

"Pleased to meet you too."

Yuna returned her greeting with a wide smile, making Nasha's eyes widen with surprise.

"Nasha."

The maid beside Nasha scolded her in a low voice.

"I apologize deeply, Lady Celiastina. Nasha has only just started working here, so please forgive her rudeness."

"I-I apologize!"

Nasha, who seemed to realize her attitude had been wrong, turned pale and lowered her head. Yuna hurriedly waved her hands.

"There's nothing to apologize for! Don't be too hard on yourself, get used to it slowly, okay?"

"Y-Yes. Thank you very much."

"Nasha, how long has it been since you started?"

"A week, my lady."

"Then, you're still in the middle of remembering everything. It must be hard."

"Y-Yes."

"Are you living here while you work?"

"Y-Yes."

"I see. Is your home far from here?"

“No, it is very close, my lady.”

“Ah, then it’d be easy to return home. That’s nice.”

“Y-Yes.”

.....It’s hopeless. The conversation wasn’t flowing at all. It felt more like she was doing an interrogation. Nasha seemed to be nervously answering her questions with the word “yes” and so forcing any more of a conversation just seemed wrong. Yuna showed a smile and then gently ended their conversation.

While they were doing this, the senior maid had completely arranged all the preparations for tea.

“–Wah, such pretty pastries!”

Yuna raised her voice enthusiastically when the pastries were served. They were such artful dishes that just looking at them made her content.

“I wonder how they make them so pretty. Ah! Nasha, are you good at making sweets?”

Upon this topic suddenly getting brought up, Nasha moved her body hastily.

“Um, me!? –I-I like to eat them more than I like making them.”

It was a very clear answer.

But, as if realizing her inappropriate words, Nasha turned red and looked down.

“It’s fine. I like eating more than baking too. Next time, let’s eat and compare sweets together.”

“Y-Yes. Ah, no, I mean, that would be out of the question.”

“.....Lady Celiastina, we apologize for taking up your precious time. We shall now excuse ourselves.”

As if deciding that it wouldn’t do to ruin the saint’s mood by exposing her to any more of this disgraceful behavior, the senior maid bowed sharply, and brought the cart out. Nasha, the new maid, gave a clumsy bow and followed after the other maid hurriedly.

“That girl, Nasha, seems nice. –I wonder if we can be friends.”

†

While she was shut away in her room, Yuna had another unexpected visitor.

The next day, the person who visited Yuna, was a person whose appearance shocked her the same way Asyut’s visit did.

The priestess wearing deep purple robes, Yodel.

According to Linus, she was a woman who held a top class power and authority in this country. And she hated Celiastina, who wasn’t like a saint, and was thinking of a way somehow to abase her influence. Due to Linus’ warning about how she would be taken advantage of if Yodel saw an opening, Yuna’s body naturally stiffened.

“How are you faring, Lady Celiastina?”

Exactly like the first time they met, those eyes looked straight at Yuna and pierced her. She couldn’t meet Yodel’s eyes and unintentionally averted her gaze.

“.....Thank you for your concern. I have been spending time without being in any discomfort.”

She returned her words cautiously. Following that, Yodel suddenly showed a sarcastic smile.

“That is good. If that were not the case then Lord Asyut’s efforts would have gone to waste. Because he had firmly told everyone in every direction to not ruin the mood of the Lady Saint, who is shut in her room.”

Yuna clenched her fist. The “other” that occupied a part of her heart began to feel a rage. There was an extraordinarily sharp reaction against Yodel. –Calm down, please calm down. Yuna muttered this inaudibly over and over again. But at this rate she didn’t feel confident in being able to face Yodel while controlling herself. Yuna slowly stood up from her seat.

“Y-Yodel, would you like some tea?”

She worked to keep her voice level and nonchalant.

“You are going to make the tea personally?”

“I don’t know how well it will taste though.”

“No, thank you, then.”

Behind Yuna, who was standing in front of the tea utensils, there was the presence of Yodel standing up. When Yuna looked back, Yodel was staring firmly at her with eyes that held an open anger – even more than before – towards her.

“Let us not continue these indirect barbed greetings. It is a waste of both of our time. I will get straight to the point. –Lady Celiastina, why have you released everyone from the Holy Jail at this point in time? I would like to know.”

Yuna remembered the conversation she exchanged with Asyut yesterday, and slowly turned to face Yodel.

“.....I...”

She clenched her fist again. This time it was to rebuke her scared self.

“I saw those who were hurt with these eyes, and I wasn’t able to let that pass. When I thought about what I could do for them, the first thing I thought of was releasing them from the Holy Jail.”

“Why are you talking as if this was someone else’s problem.”

Yodel’s eyes widened as if she heard something she couldn’t believe.

“You, the person who found joy in hurting others.”

“.....Asyut also asked why now of all times. And that it was ridiculous to do things over again.”

“That’s right!”

Yodel spat that out hatefully.

“It’s already too late, anything and everything. You should understand if Lord Asyut also said that. There is no point in smoothing things over at this time and acting like a

good saint!"

"No matter how many people tell me this, I don't want to give up. It's true that I am too late on a lot of things but I don't believe it is too late for the future that is still to come."

"No."

That sharp voice, sharper and more pointed than a sword tip, pierced Yuna.

"The blood that has flowed for your sake will continue to spread without stopping, until even the future ahead is stained. You will definitely feel that soon."

At those menacing words, Yuna couldn't move.

"-Excuse me."

Yodel said that coldly over her shoulder, flipping the hem of her long robe, and exiting the room without giving Yuna any time to respond. She passed Nasha, the maid who just arrived and who looked at Yodel's departing back with surprise.

"Ah, sorry..... , Nasha."

At Yuna's weak voice, Nasha showed some hesitation before soon coming into the room.

"U-Um, if you wanted, I was thinking of preparing lunch."

"Yes, please. Thank you."

Yuna displayed a smile, but there was no strength in it. The exchange she had just had with Yodel exhausted her energy terribly. Even though she replied firmly with something about how she didn't want to give up, it sounded optimistic, and was it nothing more than just a convenient thing for her self-satisfaction-?

(I don't know.)

She felt like everything Yodel said was honest. From the start, was trying her best and cheering herself up just a stupid and useless thing to do?

"Um, Lady Celiastina..."



“.....What is it?”

Raising her head, she saw Nasha looking at her worriedly.

“Your pallor does not look very well. Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, thank you for worrying.”

“That lady just now was Lady Yodel, wasn’t it?”

Nasha sent a fleeting glance at the door but of course Yodel’s figure was no longer there.

“Mm.”

“.....She seems to have changed quite a bit.”

“Wha, Nasha, you know Yodel?”

“Ah, no, we aren’t acquaintances! I just know about her from my side.”

Nasha hurriedly waved both hands. But then, after seeming to think for a little bit, she brought both hands gently to her chest.

“.....there is this though.”

She took out a beautiful pendant with small purple jewels from underneath her clothes.

“I was given this by Lady Yodel when I was a child.”

“From Yodel?”

“Yes. It was when I was still just a child and it was my daily routine to go to the church nearby my home. Every day I showed up at that church alone. One day, on some kind of occasion, Lady Yodel stopped by that church. And then the priest introduced me to Lady Yodel.”

Nasha smiled sweetly at the nostalgia of the past.

“At that time, Lady Yodel must have been younger than I am now but she was very lovely and mature. As a child, I thought she was an amazing young lady. Lady Yodel crouched to meet my eyes and then asked “For what do you wish for that you come to this church?”. And I told her that I wished for my friends, strangers, and everyone to live peacefully and happily. At that, Lady Yodel smiled widely and said “Don’t ever forget those kind feelings” before giving me this pendant.”

Saying that, Nasha gazed at the pendant in her palm. Yuna followed her actions, quiet.

–It was a beautiful purple without any impurities. A sublime and holy color.

Yuna thought that it was exactly like Yodel herself.

Yodel was not treating her badly for no reason. She was acting on her own beliefs, calling what was right as right and what was wrong as wrong. Amongst those, Yuna – as Celiastina – was deemed as “wrong”. She was sad about that but it wasn’t Yodel’s fault.

(I’m sorry, Yodel. I really do understand what you and Asyut have said. And I think what you two have said might be the right thing, but still... I want to try.)

Even if this was a journey that no one would welcome, even if this was nothing more than self-satisfaction, if there was something she herself could do then there was no way she could just stand still.

†

Even more days passed and, just as she was approaching a week of having been shut in her own room, Linus appeared again.

“It’s been a while, Celia. Nothing has happened?”

Yuna nodded, somewhat disappointed at his words about it being a while. It’s true though, just like his words, it has been a while since she saw Linus. During this week, he hadn’t come to see her even once, and Yuna was a bit bitter about that. –Wasn’t he quite heartless?

Whether Linus noticed Yuna’s sulky attitude or not, he continued on talking as if not seeming to care.

“Good job on enduring this long time. For now the commotion of the liberation of the Holy Jail has calmed down more, so I won’t mind you regaining your freedom soon.”

“–Really?”

At those words she had been impatiently waiting for, Yuna’s face quickly split into a smile. The faint anger that she had held just now for Linus was blown away in an instant.

In any case, the only thing she could think about in these past few days was hurrying up and leaving this room. She couldn’t do anything locked up in her room. Celiastina’s past up to now, her own future from now, the things she wanted to do, the things she should do– she thought on a lot of things but if she didn’t actually act then nothing would change. Just thinking about those things only made her irritated at the time she was spending locked in her room.

“I’m so glad. I had started to wonder if maybe I wouldn’t be let out of this room anymore.”

She said this jokingly, but in truth she was secretly concerned. She thought that maybe it was their goal to use the commotion of the liberation of the Holy Jail as an excuse to imprison the dangerous saint– but it looks like she worried over nothing.

“No way. Because you still have to work hard from here on. For example, the ceremonies you must attend every day. In fact, in just a bit, the Ceremony of Blessing must be done.”

“Eh.....”

She had to do that ceremony where she said words of blessings again? She felt completely depressed that the first thing she had to do after coming out of her room in a week was “that”.

“You can attend, yes?”

“.....Mm, I’ll attend.”

Although she nodded, a heavy sigh leaked out of her mouth.

“Somehow, it seems very tough to be the Lady Saint. Every day there’s nothing but

repeating ceremonies, huh.”

“That’s not the case for today though. Once the Ceremony of Blessing is done, there is just the Ceremony of Dusk Purification.”

“Really? You mean every day isn’t full of ceremonies like that time before?”

“There were especially many on that day. In a month it happens twice or thrice. If the whole day was filled with ceremonies then you’d be crushed.”

“Whaat...”

Breathing out, she was relieved all at once. And then, immediately, if this was the case, a thought surfaced in her mind.

“Then, once the Ceremony of Blessing is over, can I go to where Aeneas is? I have something I want to talk about.”

He was that young man who lead Yuna to the Holy Jail that night. He was also a victim of Celiastina. And yet, he was someone who showed kindness and concern for his assailant, Celiastina–.

Linus, who received Yuna’s proposal, unexpectedly hesitated. He had an indecisive expression that seemed to wonder at what he should do. Yuna looked at that Linus with surprise. She had thought, without a doubt, that he would say “Go ahead, as you please”.

“.....I wonder whether his feelings will be a positive or negative contribution to you. It’s still in a questionable stage, so I would suggest not getting too deeply involved with him.”

His feelings? Was he talking about the feelings of hatred towards the saint? If so, Yuna understood that.

“There’s something I need to meet him directly to talk about. I understand and I won’t stay long enough to rub his feelings the wrong way. Once I’m done, I’ll return immediately to my room.”

“Hmm, it seems like you’ve completely missed the point.”

“Missed the point? What did I miss?”

“Nevermind, it should be fine. If that is your wish, then go ahead, as you please.”

Finally, the answer that she had predicted was returned to her. But she was extremely curious about his vagueness halfway through. However, if she asked him about it then he wouldn't tell her anything. They've only known each other for a short time, but somehow she understood that he was that kind of a person. That's why she didn't touch the subject of Aeneas any more, and changed the subject before he could change his mind.

“Hey, Linus, you work as an advisor to the prime minister, right? I don't know much about that but isn't that a position of considerable status? Is it okay for you to be here wandering about by yourself?”

Linus had an exasperated look on his face.

“Wandering about, to think you'd say that.”

“Oh, um, I'm sorry.”

“But, actually, I'm not that busy. An advisor to the prime minister and the deputy prime minister are different, you know? I, hm, attend some meetings where I meet a number of people, act as someone the prime minister can gossip with, and other menial jobs like that. The prime minister discusses political issues with the deputy prime minister, and the things he discusses with me are things like his mustache gloss for the day.”

“.....You're being modest, aren't you?”

Who knows, Linus seemed to say as he merely smiled.

“Well, presently, my job is to be the babysitter of our lovely Lady Saint Celiastina. In other words, it is about time for us to head to the ceremony– is what I ought to say.”

Ending the conversation there, Linus took Yuna out of the room. As they headed towards the room of blessing, Yuna stared secretly at the broad back in front of her.

For some reason, the more she knew about him the less she understood of this person that was Linus Ventris– Yuna thought.

When the Ceremony of Blessing was safely finished, Yuna jogged through a long corridor alone.

She was heading to meet Aeneas.

According to Linus, Aeneas was right in the middle of training. The training grounds were at the base of a tower, which Linus had explained to her sketchily by pointing out a window at it. Yuna dashed towards that sneakily while keeping an eye out on her surroundings. As she thought, Linus wasn't going to guide her there but it was better for her this way. If he arrived at the training grounds of the soldiers together with the Lady Saint, there would be a small commotion without a doubt. If that happened then meeting Aeneas would just cause him a great deal of trouble, which was why she was sneaking out alone. At this time, the soldiers would be on their afternoon break and if everything went well then she might be able to draw him out alone.

Normally, she wouldn't be heading out to meet Aeneas and would instead be calling him to her. Not doing so was unnatural and incomprehensible as the saint. However, Yuna wasn't that arrogant to do something like call Aeneas, who had been hurt terribly by the incident four months ago. In that case, it was better for her to head out to meet him even if it would be somewhat suspicious to others.

So that she wouldn't stand out badly, she removed all her clinking jewelry and gathered her pale blonde hair into a bun before covering it with a thin veil. She also wrapped a scarf around her neck so that the Holy Mark couldn't be seen. And then she started walking quickly towards her goal, the tower, but— she was too naive, and Yuna immediately started to regret.

As she stepped out into the west side of the royal palace, for the first time, it appeared to be a space open mainly for servants and soldiers. There was a bit of a corridor but it soon became sandy soil that spread out without any meaning. There were many small buildings lined up along the side, creating just the shape of a corridor, and this open atmosphere with no ceiling and no walls was almost like a village. Unlike the surroundings she had spent so far as Celiastina, the people who passed her all seemed to be common people, and there were many. On that subject, this might be the residential area of the servants. Yuna was made nervous as she saw the sight of young men in soldier uniforms hanging out in large groups and sitting on stairs or wooden boxes while chatting pleasantly. —It was clear that she was unsettled. But, at the same

time as that nervousness, there was also a part of her that felt nostalgia. Yuna was still just a village girl, only a few weeks ago, and it was obvious she would feel that surrounded in this atmosphere. Though, as expected of this place being within the royal palace, it was still many degrees more refined than an ordinary village.

Although Yuna was nervous, she couldn't feel any hate or fear in the eyes of the people around her. It seemed like they were just conscious of her as a young lady with some kind of status. Come to think of it, the lower the class a person had, the less of an opportunity they would have to come in contact with the Lady Saint. Normally, even the maids who serviced her were all sponsored as daughters of aristocrats. Which meant that it wasn't strange for there not to be anyone who recognized her face in this place. But still she couldn't be relieved. It didn't change the fact that she was out-of-place.

(Uhm... everyone's looks are starting to hurt.)

There was no one who called out to her directly, but everyone was observing her actions. The soldiers who were sitting on the ground and cracking jokes as they polished their swords. The servants carrying ingredients from the carts to the storehouses. The cleaning women who were heading to the washing place while carrying baskets full of dirty clothes. Everyone was glancing over at her intermittently.

(If I was going to have to pass through this place no matter what, he could have at least given me a warning.)

A specific irresponsible babysitter, who wasn't here, appeared in her mind.

(There are more people than I thought. At this rate, even if I make it to the training grounds I might not be able to call out Aeneas.)

Aeneas, when his name came to mind, Yuna became a little depressed. He must have been from an upper class aristocratic family to be a squire at that young age. For that kind of person to be thrown into the ranks of a common soldier and treated the same as them, how humiliating was that. Yuna, who had been a commoner, and was experiencing the world of the upper class aristocrats, was just now starting to realize the difference. And that's why she felt like she could understand his mortification. To her this was a comfortable and calm atmosphere, but to an upper class aristocrat like him wasn't it just like a pigsty? –It's depressing but she was sure it was like that.

Yuna, who had been thinking meaninglessly and idly as she walked, soon reached her objective, the tower. It was remarkably tall, perhaps to fulfill its role as a lookout, and its painted white walls made it a cold building. Flat ground was spread immediately beside it and it seemed like that was the training grounds. Looking to be on their break, there were soldiers scattered here and there stuffing their cheeks full with bread and fruit. But there were too few of them. In the wide training grounds there was a countable amount of people. Again, Yuna had an “oh no” moment of regret. It looked like, when they were on their break, the soldiers were allowed to leave the training grounds. And that was why she had seen so many soldiers along the way here–.

Aah, heaving a large sigh, Yuna turned around in a circle to look around the area. But to her disappointment she didn’t see the person she was looking for. Aeneas was most likely taking his break at some other place.

It didn’t seem to be a good idea to wait here until he returned to ambush him. If that happened, it would become a large fuss. Giving up, Yuna decided to return for now. It couldn’t be helped and somehow she would have to guess the time that Aeneas would finish his training–.

“Miss.”

Yuna jumped upon hearing a voice call out to her suddenly.

Yuna, who had mistakenly thought that there was no one here who would call out to her familiarly, turned around greatly perturbed. And there stood a completely unknown man. He was looking down at her with an amused smile.

–Who was this? Right away, Yuna looked the man up and down, observing him. He had a very distinct and cheery blond hair, more so than Celiastina or Aeneas, and dark skin. His eyes were the same color as his hair, gold, and they shone bright like a cat’s eyes. At a glance his hair was carelessly disheveled and stretched long in the back; she also glimpsed a countless number of earrings on his ears. She had thought Linus was large but this man would be able to compete with him. But he was much more muscular than Linus and his body was tight with a skilled force. He was clothed in a white uniform of such quality that if Aeneas had worn it he would have looked like a prince without fail, but on this man it was so worn that she could not even feel a sense of its elegance.



(He's like... a lion.)

That was Yuna's first impression of him.

During the time Yuna reached that conclusion, the other party seemed to have also gotten an impression of Yuna. The man, with a broad and daring grin, shrugged his shoulders somewhat exaggeratedly.

"What's a noble lady looking like you doing in such a savage place like this? If you're lost then I suppose I could escort you."

"Uh, umm..."

Were those words one would use towards a noble lady? Yuna quipped inside her mind as she hesitated.

-Who? Who was this? Moreover, at this man's appearance, wasn't she standing out more and more?

As she became flustered from the gazes of everyone around them, the man laughed out loud in an extremely loud voice.

"Aw, don't be so scared. It's not like I'll eat you."

"Uh."

"Uh, you say. What's with that reaction? Strange girl."

The man chuckled again. It was impossible for Yuna to understand just what was so funny.

"But, hmm--"

The man suddenly brought his face close to peer at her face under the veil. Yuna hurriedly drew back.

"A beauty exactly like the rumors."

What?! As Yuna stared at him in shock, the man continued on with his words.

“You’re– Saint Celiastina, aren’t you.”

Having her name suddenly guessed right, Yuna’s words were stuck. Should she confirm it? Or should she deny it? In this situation where she didn’t know a thing about the other person, she couldn’t make a decision.

She looked around, troubled, but of course there was no one around to bring her help. But, though she was in a difficult situation, it didn’t seem like the people around them heard the name this man said. There only seemed to be a small commotion as their surroundings took notice of their conversation.

“I said it before, but you don’t have to be so cautious.”

He said it as if he had nothing to do with what was going on, but in her mind Yuna objected and thought that it’d be impossible not to.

“My name is Siegcrest. I’ve seen you before but it was always from a distance, so this is the first time we’ve met face to face. –Pleased to make your acquaintance from hereafter, Lady Saint.”

As if he were playing around, the loud man called Siegcrest sketched an elegant knight-like bow. Yuna, worried about the people watching them, hurriedly stopped the man.

“U-Um. Please don’t do that here.”

“Because you came here sneakily–?”

“Well..... , um...”

“Just what kind of business is it to have the Lady Saint come here personally? If it’s okay, could you tell me?”

“Saint, saint... please don’t call me that repeatedly.”

“But the saint is a saint and you’re a saint, so I can’t call you anything else.”

Siegcrest, amused at Yuna being flustered, repeated the word “saint” many times on purpose. At this, even Yuna would become irritated.

“Celia. Please call me by name.”

“Oho, that’s an honor. I’m gonna tell you now but I’m the type of person who doesn’t hold back. If you tell me to call you Celia then I really will call you that.”

“Go ahead, as you please.”

In fact, it’d be the most fitting to be called Yuna but she couldn’t do that. In that case, being called Celia was many times better than being called Celiastina. She thought the sound of the name Celiastina was pretty but each time she was called by that name it felt like there was a wall between her and the other person that grew increasingly taller.

“Then Celia it is.”

Siegcrest threw an arm around Yuna’s shoulders and pulled her closer.

“W-What are you doing!? Please let me go!”

.....She had thought that the walls around her and other people were towering but something like this was a little too casual, wasn’t it? Yuna became flustered and protested.

“Hm? Isn’t this okay, since we’re in a relationship where we call each other by nicknames. Oh, Celia, you smell nice.”

“We don’t call each other by nicknames! I haven’t called you anything!”

“Don’t be shy, I don’t mind if you call me Sieg.”

“No, thank you!”

Looking down at Yuna, who was flailing under his arm, Siegcrest laughed in amusement.

“Your beauty is exactly like the rumors, but your personality doesn’t seem to be like the rumors.”

Choosing the chance when Siegcrest’s arm relaxed for a moment, Yuna quickly turned aside.

“So, what kind of business does the unexpectedly naive and serious Celia have to come

to a place like this?”

Yuna sent a fleeting glare at the man who turned to face her directly. Just who exactly was this abnormally frank man? Their conversation up to now – if this could even be called one – left her knowing nothing about him except for superficial things such as his name. And yet this man by the name of Siecrest was pressing onward with the conversation. It was definitely a fact that she didn’t know what to do, being in a place like this alone, but was it okay for her to trust in this man?

(No, it isn’t.)

Suspicious. He was too suspicious in multiple meanings of the word. Seeming to understand what was going through Yuna’s mind, Siecrest raised both his hands in a surrendering pose.

“You seem to have been put on guard. Ah, I’m shocked–”

She’d like to see a girl who wasn’t put on guard from a showy man like him.

“Well, I can understand if the Lady Saint has no interest in the troops of the country. But it is just a li~ttle painful for you not to have even the slightest recognition of the name Siecrest and this uniform. You don’t know me?”

“I-I’m sorry.”

It looked like he was a well-known man. But there was no way Yuna, who just recently became the saint, would know. –Although, she felt like she knew that white uniform. Remember, remember. A white uniform...

“–Ah! The Order of Holy Knights!”

“Oh?”

“.....That uniform. It belongs to them, right?”

“.....Well, you’re not wrong. Okay, that’s right. Let’s leave it at that.”

It seemed like Siecrest had wanted her to guess who he was. But, even though he was somewhat dissatisfied, he didn’t keep it in mind and Yuna felt relieved.

Several times throughout the year at the Prayer Festivals, she's seen the Order of Holy Knights before in parades. During those times, all the knights wore white uniforms. The memory of that remained faintly in Yuna's memories. Yuna, who was more interested in eating than the parade, didn't remember any more than that. But even so, Yuna had a rough idea of the structure of the country's military.

Siegcrest was saying he belonged to the Order of Holy Knights. They were the leading group of knights in this country. They were a super elite group which only allowed people who possessed both status and power to enroll. Yuna remembered that Aeneas and Neisan, who used to be squires, were considered a part of the Order of Holy Knights too. Incidentally, Asyut being appointed as the First Holy Knight meant that he was a knight who was to become the saint's spouse and was a position with a religious tinge. Although tentatively it could be considered he belonged to the Order of Holy Knights, it didn't seem like he was as restricted as they were. There was one more group of knights and they were the Order of Knights. Compared to the Order of Holy Knights they were a little more plain, but there was no change in how they were also a group of elites. For village girls, generally, if pushed to say, it was a dream to fall in love and marry a Knight of the Order to gain money and social status. It was rare for the Order of Holy Knights to leave the royal palace and, so to speak, they were exclusively for the daughters of aristocrats. They were beings who commoners could not reach. Compared to that, the Order of Knights were in every direction and patrolled through towns and so were easy to approach..... saying that though, the past Yuna did not know even one knight. There was no mistaking that a knight, no matter what kind, was still a far removed existence.

The knights of the kingdom formed these two elite groups, but there was another army of regular soldiers. Currently, the majority of the soldiers in this area right now belonged to this group. Aeneas, who had been sentenced to have his status demoted, was living his life as an ordinary soldier. The army was a group that generally accepted anybody who applied, regardless of social status or pedigree. For Aeneas to be thrown into the army was something that was hard to forgive, no matter how Yuna thought about it. –Yes, she came this far to talk about that today.

“–Huh?”

Suddenly, Yuna had a strange thought. This was definitely the training grounds for soldiers. So, why did Siegcrest, who belonged to the Order of Holy Knights, appear at the training grounds for soldiers?

“Um, Ser Siegcrest.”

“I told you Sieg is fine. More importantly, let’s finish your business, Celia. I’ll come with you, since I’m free anyway.”

“Wait, but...”

“Even you know that you’re a girl who has led a sheltered life, right? It’ll be bad to wander around in a place like this by yourself. –C’mon, c’mon, talk to me as a buddy. I might surprise you as a man who can do anything, you know?”

“Uhh... um...”

Yuna was troubled. Was it okay for her to confess that she was searching for Aeneas? If Siegcrest was part of the Order of Holy Knights then he used to be a colleague of Aeneas. What did this man think when he heard a comrade of his become demoted because of the saint’s actions? Thinking that, she was at a loss as to how to talk honestly about her goal. But she was also well aware of how she wouldn’t be able to meet Aeneas by herself at this rate.....

–ARGH, she couldn’t help but be conflicted by this and that!

“I came here to see someone called Aeneas. Do you know Aeneas?”

“.....Aeneas.”

As soon as he heard that name, Siegcrest had an expression that even she as an outsider could see was extremely serious. From the start he had been a loud and flashy man but his serious expression had a strange intensity to it.

“What, is the Lady Saint still infatuated with him?”

His voice clearly contained the color of contempt. Yuna, who heard that voice, felt her breath catch for an instant. But she didn’t have time to be afraid and so psyched herself up.

“So you know where he is right now. If possible, I’d like to talk to him alone.”

“You’re still gonna say that? That guy has no interest in you. Just stop, you’ve already crushed him completely under your foot during that time. Seriously, leave him alone.”

“Y-You’re mistaken. I don’t have that kind of an interest in him! So you know about what happened four months ago. In that case–”

“Of course I know. I was quite interested in that guy. –And, when I heard you released everyone from the Holy Jail, I thought you were someone who unexpectedly could reflect on their actions but–”

“It’s related to that. I was thinking that I want to return Aeneas to his original social status. And so I wanted to talk to him directly about that, because I didn’t want to just thrust another change at him and be like “Okay, case closed”. I don’t want to do things that way.”

Siegcrest kept silent and stared at Yuna as she connected her words, one after another after another.

“I don’t intend to do anything more to him. I swear. If he wishes, this time will be the last time I will ever appear in front of him again.”

“–Hmm, I see.”

Yuna was bewildered upon hearing a suddenly relaxed response..... what happened?

“Well–”

Well?

“I guess I can’t coldly refuse a beautiful girl’s request like that, huh, as a man.”

“.....Wha?”

“Okie dokie, leave it to me. I’ll take you to Aeneas immediately.”

Suddenly returning to a joking attitude, Siegcrest once again pulled Yuna into him by the shoulder. She was getting crushed under the arm of such a large man. Yuna desperately tried to pull herself away from Siegcrest but he didn’t give an inch.

“It’s enough to just tell me the place!”

“Aw, don’t say that. Right now, that guy is in a place I called him to. So, I need to head over there too.”

“Huh?”

Siegcrest called Aeneas out? Surprised, Yuna looked up at Siegcrest. When she did, the contempt that had been on his face was gone as if it didn't concern him anymore, and instead Siegcrest had an expression that was close to being called enjoyment.

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The place that Siegcrest brought her to and that they arrived at was an isolated shed, on the outskirts of the path. Around the entrance were many sacks and barrels, this place was most likely used as a temporary storehouse for food supplies. In any case, it didn't seem built to be a place for someone to live at. But Siegcrest stepped into that shed without hesitation. No way, was Aeneas inside? Yuna was perplexed, but she followed him.

“Yo, sorry for making you wait, Aeneas.”

–And sure enough, there he was.

Between the cramped and piled up boxes and barrels, Aeneas just stood there doing nothing. There was a tinge of sorrow in his eyes and he seemed to be staring vacantly out the window.

Aeneas slowly moved those depressed eyes of his, looking at Siegcrest, and then seeing the delicate girl hidden behind his shadow– an expression of shock appeared.

“L-Lady Celiastina!”

Returning to himself, Aeneas quickly straightened his back. Even though she hid her face behind a veil, it seemed like he knew immediately who the girl in front of him was.

“Hey, are you ignoring me?”

Siegcrest, who groaned that, was ignored even more.

“Lady Celiastina, what on earth is someone such as you doing in a place like this?”

“Y-Yes, um, about that.”

“Ah, could it be that you were dragged here against your will by the vice-captain.....”



“Vice-captain, do you mean Siecrest? W-Wait, no, you’re mistaken. I came all this way on my own. Because I have something to talk to you about.”

“A talk... with me...?”

Aeneas’ gaze wavered, and he was unable to hide his bewilderment.

“That’s right. And so Sieg led me to where you were.”

At that, the two of them finally concentrated their gazes on Siecrest. The man in question appeared to be in a bad mood, with a deep furrow in his brow.

“Hey, Aeneas, you have some guts, don’tcha. Did you just accuse me of kidnapping a miss against her will?”

“I-I didn’t go so far as to say that..... I apologize for my rudeness.”

“Just wh~o do you think has been the most concerned about you, a low ranking regular soldier?”

“Yes, thank you very much.”

“You don’t seem thankful at all, punk.”

“No, that’s not true...”

Oh well, Siecrest seemed to imply as he snorted.

“You know, I called you out here to convince you. I was gonna intervene and appeal directly to Celiastina to return you to your previous position of being a squire.”

But, Siecrest seemed to say as he glanced at Yuna.

“It looks like that’s not necessary anymore. Because, the Lady Saint herself went out of her way to come here. I’m sure the current Celia won’t do anything bad to you.”

Suddenly being talked about, Yuna felt her body startle and stiffen. He openly didn’t trust her and sent her a challenging-like smile, as if testing her. The man called Siecrest had a direct expression. Right now, Yuna didn’t have the backbone to accept that straight on. Wondering what to do, her gaze started darting around.

“Right, Celia?”

“U-Umm, o-of course.”

“Good. Then the third wheel is going to leave now. I’ll leave the rest to you two young people. Take your time.”

Smirking, Siecrest quickly left the shed..... somehow she felt like he left in a way that she couldn’t understand. Although she was astonished, Yuna was thankful to Siecrest for taking her here and letting her be alone with Aeneas. On the other side, Aeneas was staring at the door that Siecrest left through with a dumbfounded expression.

“Umm..... Aeneas.”

He breathed out and then once again straightened his back.

“I-I apologize, Lady Celiastina. He acts on appalling rudeness.....”

“I’m fine with that. Because someone like me isn’t particularly admirable or anything.”

Yuna was flustered at how ashamed Aeneas seemed to be. She reassured Aeneas who was covered in a cold sweat and bowing his head over and over again, before the two of them finally sat down on some wooden boxes.

“So, um, what I wanted to talk to you about was..... your status.”

“Me? –No, I mean, about me?”

“It’s really okay not to be so humble. Let’s talk normally. If you don’t then I’ll start to feel like I need to talk politely.”

“That would be unthinkable! Please do no such thing. I wi– I’ll try to talk normally as much as possible.”

Good, Yuna nodded greatly. Nevertheless, he still seemed concerned about having a polite tone but that couldn’t be helped.

“.....Due to my past whimsy, you were demoted to the status of an ordinary soldier. But before you used to be a squire, right?”

“Yes..... that is right. I was a trainee until fifteen years old and for four years since turning sixteen I have been serving the country as a squire.”

There was even a period of being a trainee? Yuna lost her words out of surprise. She was sure that being a trainee was an apprenticeship period to becoming a holy knight, and only granted to sons of aristocrats who had considerable power and influence. In other words, Aeneas was absolutely the young master of a well-to-do family. And yet.....

“I really did an outrageous thing, huh. –though I already knew this.”

“No, I’m fine.”

Aeneas calmly shook his head.

“In fact, this has been a good experience for me. I feel like I’ve really understood in these four months just how large the world is and how self-centered and ignorant I was.”

Saying that, Aeneas gave a faint smile. There was no trace of a lie or exaggeration in that expression.

“Besides, I’m happy to have been freed from all the bonds and obligations that were around me up to now. Since I was young, I was surrounded by people who told me that becoming a holy knight was everything in life. And, before I knew it, that may have become a heavy burden on me. Now, on the contrary, I’m not carrying anyone’s expectations and simply living just relying on my own strength. It is a comfortable responsibility to carry.”

Aeneas’ words were gentle. And calm. But she was certain that he suffered quite a lot to come to this point where he could speak these words. She was sure that he wasn’t able to make friends because of the difference in status, that he had to do work that couldn’t be called anything but odd jobs, and that whenever he remembered his past it would be a long-passed glory. And yet, this person– was amazing. Yuna felt her heart tighten.

“I think you’re someone who should be a holy knight.”

Yuna thought about how she’d like someone like this to be a person who stood at the top.

“Don’t you want to return to your previous position?”

“You mean being a squire?”

“Yes. Having been deprived of your position by my whim and then having it returned might be asking too much but I can’t leave you here like this. Moreover, I want a person like you to become a holy knight and support this country..... um, in other words, this is merely my personal hope.”

It was frustrating. What could she do to get her feelings across to him? Yuna tried her best to spin her words but no matter what words she used she felt like it wouldn’t completely convey what she wanted. All her acts up to now covered and blurred her true meaning hard. Any words she used would slip on that offensive film, be covered with disgrace, and be reduced to an atrocious form.

But there was no contempt in Aeneas’ eyes as he quietly looked at Yuna. And then he dropped his gaze, and muttered to himself.

“.....You’re a strange person.”

“Huh?”

“It feels like you’re a different person than the one I met before.”

Ack, Yuna felt her words become stuck. There was no way she could tell him that he was exactly right.

“I’ve thought about how I should hate you for my best friend, who you put into the Holy Jail. I felt like that was my duty..... But, I wonder why, why is it that I can’t seem to hate you?”

“Aeneas.....”

“Until I met you again a few days ago, I’m sure I hated you. But now I–”

He suddenly closed his mouth.

“–Nevermind, sorry. I’m talking about bygones.”

He was a serious and kind young man. Yuna thought that even if it hadn’t been his best

friend that was imprisoned but himself, this young man would probably say these same words in this place. No, it might have been because it was his best friend that had been imprisoned, that Aeneas suffered even more distress.

“Thank you, Aeneas. But the words “thank you” are the only things I can respond to your kindness with. Otherwise, I have no skill other than to throw around my position as a saint selfishly.”

That was mortifying. Could it be that the past Celiastina was also caught in this kind of conflict? Did she fall into despair at how she actually had no power?

“Please do not look down on yourself like that. Because you are the hope of the people just by being here like this.”

“Originally, maybe. But in this royal palace there’s no one who finds hope from the current me. I’m all alone.”

“Lady Celiastina.”

A solemn air wrapped around the place. This won’t do, Yuna returned to herself. She didn’t come here to talk about her life. And even if there ever was a day, an entire day wouldn’t be enough. Yes, wasn’t she supposed to talk to Aeneas right now about his social status?

“S-Sorry, our conversation became strange. Let’s return to the topic. Um, at any rate, as long as you’re okay with it, Aeneas, um, how about becoming a squire... again?”

Saying that, she became timid knowing that it was a convenient suggestion for her. But she honestly thought it was wrong for him to spend his entire life as a low soldier like this.

“I am truly content with my current circumstances...”

“O-Oh...”

“But, if you’re asking me to choose another path then I have one I want to choose.”

“W-What? What is it?”

Startled, she felt her heart beat fast. If he said something like wanting to become the

leader of the Order of Holy Knights then even someone like her would be troubled. Although she wanted to atone, it was Yuna's honest feelings not to want to use her power as the saint. Though, she didn't think it was likely that someone like him would wish for something so crazy.

And then the serious expression that Aeneas had up to now broke down, and a mischievous smile appeared. Upon seeing that childish look on his face, Yuna became flustered in another way.

"If you want to return me to the position of being a squire– then I have another request. Two, actually, that I would ask of you to grant, please."

"Request?"

Yes, Aeneas nodded.

"First– I would like Neisan, my best friend, to also be returned to being a squire. Once he recovers."

He was talking about the red-haired young man who was confined in the prison. Yuna remembered him immediately. His emaciated form was, even now, still burned to the back of her eyelids.

"That was my intention as well. As long as he wishes it. Once he recovers a little more, I'd like to meet and speak with him."

"Then, until he makes a comeback I want to continue training in the army."

".....I see."

She couldn't ignore his feelings and force him. And so Yuna nodded.

"The other thing is– in the event of returning to being a squire, I would like to serve as your bodyguard, Lady Celiastina."

"Wha?"

This time an unexpected suggestion was proposed and Yuna looked into Aeneas' eyes in surprise.

“My... bodyguard?”

Aeneas gave her a small warning that what he would say next might sound rude.

“I want to know more about you as a person. Of course I won’t simply be by your side to satisfy my curiosity and I will not ignore my duties.”

Aeneas, looking like he was holding in a playful smile, returned her look directly. His appearance was so knight-like at that moment that she was inadvertently charmed. Yuna, in order to hide her red face, started to play with her hair.

–When she was young she was attracted to stories about knights and princesses. She suddenly remembered that. Right now Aeneas was nothing but an ordinary soldier in simple and slightly dirty clothes. But his voice, his eyes, and his resolute actions, were exactly like the noble knights of her stories.

“But, um, w-wait a minute.”

“You won’t allow it?”

“It’s not that I won’t allow it but, um, are you really okay with this, Aeneas? Once you become my bodyguard you’ll have to see me every day even if you don’t want to, right? Really, you wouldn’t want to see my face ever again, right?”

Saying that, she became sad. But Aeneas just quietly shook his head.

“If that was the case, then I wouldn’t have requested such a thing myself.”

“That’s true but...”

But, really, she felt like it wouldn’t be impossible with someone like Aeneas, who had integrity. Burning with a strange kind of sense of duty, he might accept duties that were out of character with his feelings.

“Please, Lady Celiastina.”

He lowered his head fully and Yuna was unable to flatly refuse him.

Seeking an answer from Yuna, who had sunk into silence, Aeneas raised his head again. He looked at her straight on with resolute eyes and Yuna found herself staring

back.

A silence, where she had nothing to say, spread.

And then, in the next moment–

“–Hey, you two, stop right there!”

The person who opened the door and entered, as if right on time, was the loud lion-like man, Siegcrest.

†

“Ah, um, sorry.”

Even she didn’t know why she was apologizing but, at any rate, Yuna lowered her head. Siegcrest, who was walking beside her, just shook his head as if in exasperation. Aeneas wasn’t around. He had been ordered by Siegcrest to return to running around the training grounds.

“It’s scary when a natural airhead runs into another natural airhead. Just a while ago, that had been an unreadable battle. Anyway, don’t get pulled in too much by that guy. Even though he’s like that, he’s a guy who really lives seriously. He’s especially lacking in judgement.”

“Wha, no, I wasn’t planning on getting pulled in–”

“Well, whatever, let’s hurry and return to the north side.”

North was the area in the royal palace where Yuna spent all her time. Siegcrest, who had told her that he was going to escort her close to her room, walked beside her. But, and maybe it was just her imagination, it felt like the gazes from the people around her were even more painful than when she had been going to Aeneas– no, it didn’t seem like it was her imagination.

Could it be that the man called Siegcrest was as unsuited to being in this place as Yuna? It was certainly out of character for a holy knight to be in this place but, bearing that in mind, the gazes were still a little too much– yes, maybe because he was a person who would do something as absurd as keeping an arm around the shoulder of the



saint? Anyhow, there was twice the amount of looks from her surroundings. Come to think of it, Aeneas called him “vice-captain”. Yuna was completely ignorant of the structure of the knight groups, she knew the meaning of “vice-captain” at least. It meant the second leader. In other words, it meant that someone was an organization’s number two... But, really, this careless man? He was endowed with a powerful atmosphere but something like dignity was another feeling. Besides, he also looked young. The Order of Holy Knights were also divided into countless units, so maybe he was one of those units’ vice-captain. Well, he was still unmistakably an important person. Yuna decided that on her own.

“Anyway, it’s surprising the people around you let you head to the west side alone. Did you do something on a whim again?”

Rude, Yuna furtively sulked. She was a bit scared to object directly and so she decided not to.

“Don’t cause too much trouble, geez.”

It sounded like he was chiding a reckless little sister. However, she could sense a little bit of scorn mixed in there. Just like before when she had told him that she wanted to meet Aeneas. This man interacted with her lightheartedly but, deep inside, he didn’t trust her. Because she realized that, Yuna became a little sad.

“So, what are you going to do about Aeneas? Are you really going to make him your bodyguard?”

“That’s, well, if Aeneas says that he’s fine with that then..... But.”

Her answer became very indecisive. Was it really okay? Once the real Celiastina returned then this time he would–.

Huh, Yuna suddenly raised her head.

“Now that you mention it, right now I don’t have any bodyguards, right?”

“Huh? What’re you talking about all of a sudden.....”

Uh oh. Siecrest didn’t know that she had lost her memories. Though, it wasn’t like she actually lost her memories.

“Um, uh, from the start I’ve disliked having people around me so they randomly started to clear away. So if I had bodyguards in there then I wouldn’t really know.”

She tried to come up with a disordered excuse. She didn’t know if it even worked as an excuse.

“.....they disappeared, huh. Because the thing with Aeneas and Neisan happened, there was no one who would take over being your bodyguard. The holy knights are basically full of young lords and so, because prestigious families were glaring at the country’s back with scary faces, it’s difficult for the country to force people to be bodyguards. And so, merely for form’s sake, they wanted to assign the lowest knights from the Order of Knights as bodyguards– but you haven’t met those kinds of people either, right? It’s because their status is so low they normally wouldn’t be allowed an audience with the saint. Well, that’s just an excuse as well. If those people were also killed by the saint then the reputation of the country would be completely ruined. It’s that kind of thing.”

Siegcrest gave a detailed explanation. Indeed, so that was how things got this way– But it looked like she was hated everywhere. Thinking that, Yuna’s mood sunk completely.

“What’s with that meek face. Are you feeling sad because no one comes close to you? If that’s the case, you should reflect carefully and try changing your way of life.”

Change her way of life, huh. He said such a difficult thing without any hesitation like it was easy. The fact that she was a completely different person in this body didn’t change the fact that she was enclosed by these surroundings one bit. Even if she just changed herself, if the people around her didn’t accept that then there would be no point–.

While they talked about that and walked for a bit, familiar scenery jumped into Yuna’s vision. They reached the north side of the royal palace. There were few people walking around the area but each one had a neat appearance and prim face. Seeing that they returned, Yuna breathed a sigh. And she thought on how strange it was that she would feel relief at this cold environment. Familiarity was a frightening thing.

“Well, this is my stop and I’m going to go back now.”

“Wait, you’re going home already?”

She accidentally let out a dependent voice. Even if he felt contempt for her at the bottom of his heart, it was hard for her to part with Siecrest who faced her with a smile.

“Hm? What, what, are you seducing me? That won’t do, Lady Saint, to be fond so easily towards a lower class person.”

“N-No, that’s not.....”

She received a light shock to be perceived in such a way. But it looked like he was just playing with her lightly. Siecrest had a wide smirk as he looked at Yuna and continued to crack even more jokes.

“Eh, you’re saying it’s not so easy for anyone to be invited by you? Could it be that I’m a chosen man? Then that’s an honor. If you’re saying that you’re making an advance as a woman then okay. If that’s the case–”

“Geez, Sieg!!”

“–Lady Celiastina!”

Suddenly.

She intended to reprimand Siecrest but, conversely, Yuna was greatly startled to hear a misdirected reprimanding voice in her direction. Furthermore, this voice was one she had heard before. Or more like one she had gotten used to hearing.

(It’s Asyut.....)

Turning around with a weary face, sure enough she could see a black-haired young man with a taciturn expression walking towards them. He was angry again. Rather, it was sad that she hadn’t seen him not be angry.

Now, how could she get out of this place?

As she thought on how she wasn’t able to contend with Asyut as an opponent, Yuna sent a glance at Siecrest beside her. As she did, unexpectedly, even Siecrest had a scowl on his face as if he were saying “a bothersome encounter is coming”.

(Huh, do they know each other?)

She thought that because she could see in Siecrest's scrunched expression something like amusement at facing a close friend.

"Yo, Asyut."

Of all things, Siecrest raised his left hand lightheartedly and called out to the First Holy Knight without any titles. Yuna's eyes went round.

(This person is amazing!)

She was impressed more than ever.

"-Sieg! What are you doing to Lady Celiastina....."

At any rate, that Holy Knight Asyut overlooked Yuna and seemed to question Siecrest. On her part, she was surprised to see them acting towards each other like old friends.

"What am I doing. Hey, that's rude, dude. I didn't really do anything. It's just that Celia was wandering around alone in the west side and so I protected her."

"You, how can you call the saint by a nickname!"

"What, it's fine isn't it. Since Celia was the one to ask me to call her that. Right, Celia?"

Right, Celia, he said. Yuna felt intensely dizzy. He also disclosed that she went to the west side. In addition, Siecrest was also making it her fault that he was calling her by a nickname?

At any rate, it looked like Asyut's attention turned towards her due to Siecrest calling out to her. With a severe expression, he fixed a stern and unsparing gaze on Yuna.

"Lady Celiastina."

What amazing force.

"You went to the west side alone?"

".....Y-Yes."

"I was searching for you when I heard that you suddenly disappeared. -Even though I

had been relieved when you participated in this morning's ceremony quietly. The moment I looked away, you do this?"

".....I-I'm sorry."

"If you are going to apologize then please refrain from doing these careless actions in the first place. Because it would be too late if something were to happen to you."

".....Y-Yes."

"Hey, calm down Asyut. It looks like Celia is reflecting on her actions?"

"You shut up, Sieg!"

".....Y-Yes."

"Moreover, Lady Celiastina, I am not impressed at you walking with "this" in front of everyone."

Did he just call Siecrest "this"? An angry First Holy Knight was completely terrifying. And no one could stop him.

"Surely you are aware of who he is? To have a personal relationship with the future leader of the Order of Holy Knights is outrageous!"

"Wha, leader of the Order of Holy Knights?"

She didn't hear about that! But there was no one who caught the scream in Yuna's mind. Asyut's lecture continued.

"You know this isn't something that can be settled on a whim. To be indiscriminate with the vice-captain of the Order of Holy Knights– such a thing is an act equal to smearing the face of this kingdom with mud!"

"H-Hey Asyut..... you're going too far."

As one would expect, the looks from their surroundings became painful. Though it wasn't as bad as the west side, there were a lot of servants here. Even those walking in the hallways, were glancing at them – though not to the extent of being disrespectful – but they were still closely watching them.

“Same goes for you! Hurry up and understand your own position! Do you know what kind of impression you give to everyone when you and the saint are walking alone together? It’s troubling when you keep on wandering around with that irresponsible attitude!”

“I get it, sheesh! My bad. I was the one who made a pass at Celia on a whim. Besides, it didn’t seem like she knew who I was. Don’t get any angrier than this.”

“Then, will you get angry in my stead?”

“I don’t want that either.”

“Good grief! You’re always like this.”

Haa, Asyut released a huge sigh. He pressed against his forehead with his right hand and looked like he was completely exhausted. Even while she was the one being raged at Yuna thought about how he seemed the type to burden himself with every worry.

“So, what exactly was your business in the west side, Lady Celiastina?”

“Um!”

This time it was this question. What now? If she talked honestly about Aeneas then wouldn’t she cause him trouble as well? Yuna, whose words were stuck, panicked but she knew that she was facing someone who wouldn’t overlook her panic. But, that’s why.....

“She went to see Aeneas.”

As if not caring about Yuna’s hesitation, Siegcrest was the one who spoke. The instant he said that, Asyut’s face stiffened.

“Aeneas? From the House of Delray?”

“Yes, during the incident everyone’s talking about, Aeneas Noah Delray was demoted to being an ordinary soldier in the army.”

“Sieg!”

She was flustered as she tried to warn him not to say that, but she was too late.

“It looked like this time she wanted to apologize in person to him. And return the status of being a squire that was deprived from him.”

She pulled the sleeve of Siecrest’s uniform in protest but Siecrest didn’t seem to care. Rather, he was calm and acting like he didn’t even notice his sleeve being pulled.

“Lady Celiastina, what is the meaning of this?”

“Well, hold on, Asyut. Do something about that scary look. It’s because of that that Celia is so scared that she can’t say anything even if she wanted to say something. Besides, let’s not continue to stand around and talk here. For the time being, escort Celia back to her room. I’ll explain everything properly later, ’cause I heard everything.”

So he had been eavesdropping on their talk in the shed. But Yuna couldn’t even be angry any more. Asyut also had a dissatisfied expression but it looked like he agreed with how this place had too many eyes and so didn’t pursue the topic any deeper.

Yuna quietly breathed a sigh of relief and exhaustion.

†

Asyut, who had delivered the saint to her room, straightened his posture directly and walked quickly down the corridor.

The place he arrived at was the waiting room of the vice-captain of the Order of Holy Knights. I’m coming in, he said and opened the door in a familiar movement. Inside, not suiting the ceremonious and imposing interior design of the room, was Siecrest who was sprawled out languidly on a sofa and polishing his sword listlessly.

“Oh hey, Asyut. That was fast.”

Siecrest responded lightly in a voice that didn’t sound energetic at all. He only looked over at Asyut and grinned.

“I thought you would cross-examine Celia on a ton of things. But you really came to me to hear everything, huh?”

“You’re the one who said you heard everything.”

“That’s true but it’s certainly quicker to ask the person themselves if you want to hear everything..... is what I thought you’d conclude.”

“.....I’m bad at talking alone with Lady Celiastina.”

As if feeling sulky at having spoken his true thoughts, Asyut sunk down into the opposite sofa.

“Well, the talk wasn’t that important anyway. It was just like I said. Celia took responsibility and went to Aeneas by herself to apologize. She was probably going to use that opportunity to go and apologize to the other person, that guy Neisan who was also harmed together with Aeneas. She also said that she wanted to return them to the position of being squires.”

Asyut kept silent and listened to Siecrest’s story. It was quite rare to see Asyut relaxing with his legs crossed but for Siecrest it wasn’t that particularly unusual. More importantly, there was a little feeling of discomfort mixed in the profile of the young First Holy Knight, and so Siecrest left his sword and raised the upper half of his body.

“What, you look like you want to say something.”

“.....No.”

“It’s not like it’s bad, right? What Celia did. It’s just that you’re always getting mad, so it’s hard to talk about small things.”

“I know that. –It’s true that what Lady Celiastina did wasn’t bad.”

But that was why he couldn’t understand it, Asyut’s words were stuck.

“Huh? What?”

“Today, just a while ago, was the first time you met Lady Celiastina, right?”

“Well, yeah, but what about that?”

“”That” Lady Celiastina is different from usual.”

“Meaning?”



“If she was her usual self then she’d be the person of the rumors on the streets.”

“Capricious, cold-blooded, cruel, and uncontrollably selfish.”

“Yes.”

“It’s like a story of a wicked witch.”

“Yes. And that’s why I arranged it so that you and Lady Celiastina wouldn’t meet directly. Because, without a doubt, you would have enraged Lady Celiastina.”

“Hmm, I see, so that’s why I, as the vice-captain of the Order of Holy Knights, never met the saint until now. –But, actually having met her, isn’t she just a cute young lady?”

“That’s why I’m saying it’s strange.”

Although she lost her memory, could someone change that much? Asyut wondered without saying anything. She told him that she wanted to make everyone involved with her happy. And she was actually starting to act for that sake. But, the woman he had known up to now would never admit her mistakes and go to apologize. Even if heaven and earth were to be reversed– Asyut thought. However, because the heaven and earth have remained the same, the circumstances now were reality.

“In other words, you’re saying it doesn’t make sense for Celia to suddenly become a good girl.”

“Well..... yes, putting it simply.”

“Isn’t that good? If she’s moving in a good direction.”

“It’s not just me, there are many people who are bewildered by Lady Celiastina’s change. She’s attended her ceremonies without a single complaint, and accepted her house arrest as a matter of fact. There have already been people who discussed with the king whether or not she was planning anything.”

“And what did he say? The king.”

“–The same as usual. He didn’t have much interest, and the messengers were sent away immediately.”

“Hum, well, what will be, will be” or something like that?”

“Exactly like that.”

“Heh, you’re in a tough spot, huh. A thoroughly dissolute king who walks his own path, and a thoroughly selfish and heinous saint.”

“Don’t say anything. My head will hurt even more.”

As if he was actually in pain, today Asyut had sighed countless of times. Right now, even the man in front of him was “one of those people” and so had to be managed.

“Work hard.”

Siegcrest laughed with the air of it clearly being someone else’s problem. Asyut threw a glare and then warned him.

“I intend to have you working hard too though.”

“Huh?”

“I want to ask you to be Lady Celiastina’s bodyguard.”

“-WHAT?!”

“Although the majority of the Holy Jail event has been settled, this does not mean that anyone who wants to harm Lady Celiastina will not show up in the future. Up to now, it’s been an actual problem not having any bodyguards. I was going to find a suitable person earlier but..... it looks like you and Lady Celiastina surprisingly get along. I’m counting on you.”

“Hooooold on, wait, wait. I don’t have that much free time, you know? Just how many units do you think I manage as the vice-captain? You’re telling me to watch over the saint and the knights? I’m not superhuman here and that’s gonna be impossible.”

“It’s about time to start bringing up the next vice-captain, because you’re not always going to be the vice-captain. Shouldn’t you be slowly handing over your work?”

“Hey now, you’re saying it so easily..... oh, I know, if you’re looking for a bodyguard then a candidate has appeared. Yes, yes, I was going to tell you about that too.”

“Candidate?”

“–Yep, that Aeneas guy.”

Suddenly getting a serious look, Siecrest examined his friend in front of him. Asyut’s brows inadvertently furrowed and he returned Siecrest’s look.

“Truly? Did he himself suggest being a bodyguard again?”

Upon Siecrest’s nod, Asyut grimaced as if implying that it was hard for him to understand.

“Just what is that person thinking.”

“Who knows.”

“Are you sure he didn’t have any choice because Lady Celiastina threatened him?”

“It didn’t feel like that.”

“Then how did it feel?”

That’s right, Siecrest tilted his head a little for a moment, and then straightened his posture with a too serious expression. He kneeled like a knight and pierced Asyut with a direct and strong look, staring intently at Asyut’s face.

“I want to know more about you. Please allow me to serve as your bodyguard.”

“.....what are you doing?”

“I’m being Aeneas.”

“.....”

Asyut didn’t have anything more to say. Seeing him become speechless, Siecrest sighed lightly.

“Well, unlike that guy’s appearance he’s a hot-blooded man for better or worse. Something about Celia must have touched his heartstrings or something. Though the person himself might still be unaware..... he seems to have fallen in love with Celia.”

“He used to be your subordinate. Did Aeneas feel that way for Lady Celiastina before?”

“Nah. Until he was appointed as her bodyguard, it felt like he didn’t have any kind of interest. After the incident, he didn’t condemn Celia publicly or anything but of course he didn’t seem to be interested in her either. Even I don’t know exactly what happened inside that guy.”

“I see..... And, what did Lady Celiastina have to say about this matter?”

“She was scared. It looked like she hadn’t thought Aeneas who suggest such a thing either.”

“That would be the case.”

“For the time being, between those two, it seems like the talk was concluded with them waiting for Neisan – the other person related to the incident – to recover before Aeneas takes his position as her bodyguard.”

“Has this reached the ears of Lord Linus?”

He, as the guardian of the saint, had the right to decide on anything related to Celiastina. For example, even if the girl herself was interested, if Linus didn’t consent then things wouldn’t proceed smoothly. Asyut thought on how Aeneas’ house, the Delrays, were prestigious among the noble families and for that sake they would not want to expose him to danger – in more than one meaning – by having him take a position as the saint’s bodyguard again. Even under normal circumstances, this talk about Aeneas was a large problem. They couldn’t aggravate this situation any more. Could he somehow get Linus to dismiss this proposal?

“He still doesn’t know I’d think. Since the talk the two of them had was just a while ago. But, when he’s heard it, that person wouldn’t oppose it, right? He hasn’t up to now, and he won’t ever, no?”

That was true. Linus, no matter what absurd or selfish things Celiastina said, wouldn’t remonstrate her. It might have been because Linus was running around and checking the catastrophes so that their damage was held to a minimum, unknown to everyone around, but when he looked at how aloof Linus was from the world, he didn’t believe that. Deciding that it was best not to have any expectations, Asyut immediately changed his thoughts.

“It’ll be a nuisance but it can’t be helped. I will think of a way to persuade Aeneas. At any rate, you will undertake being a bodyguard until this matter is settled.”

“Okay, okay, roger that. Geez, what a bother.”

“It might be a bother but I will be in trouble if you cut corners. Because Lady Celiastina, no matter how the person herself is, is this country’s treasure.”

“This country’s treasure... huh. Well said.”

“Those are heartfelt words.”

Yes, no matter how much he hated that woman. No matter what, Asyut couldn’t deny that one fact. And no matter how heavy a yoke that was to him. Asyut quietly lowered his eyes.

Unnoticed, a faint crescent moon illuminated the evening sky fleetingly.

# Chapter Six

The endlessly wide starry sky wrapped around this world equally.

Were her friends and parents – people she could no longer see – staring up at the same moon? While thinking that, Yuna looked up at the night sky, alone. She liked the unique smell of night. The slight moisture that was mixed in with the air made her recall a sense of nostalgia for some reason. It wasn't a bad thing. Rather, feeling comfortable, Yuna closed her eyes softly. There must be flowing water nearby because the gentle sound of water running passed through her ears faintly and she concentrated on it. – Even though the afternoon was just as quiet, when it became night it was like the world changed and she noticed various things that she hadn't noticed under the sun.

(How long can I remain here like this?)

Leaning against the balcony, Yuna did nothing but continue to look at the scenery. When she thought about how this scenery would be something she wouldn't be able to look at soon, it became all the more harder for her to avert her eyes. By nature, she had a personality where it wasn't a pain to stand still in once place for a long time. And this night too, she looked up at the stars and moon for a long time.

(–I want to meet them, my mom and dad.)

She understood it intellectually; her former self was already dead. All she did was inflict a large injury in her parents' hearts. Even if she intruded on them, she could easily imagine her parents' reactions to seeing an unacquainted girl. Just about everything of her appearance was different from the one her parents gave her. Her hair, her eyes, and even her hands and feet. If she called out "mom" in a voice they haven't heard, she is sure that she would frighten her kind mother. If she appealed to them saying that "I'm your daughter" then she could see her father, as good humored as he was, falling into a rage and telling her not to joke around.

(But even so, I want to see them. Before I die again.)

It was a completely selfish wish. But, most of all, it was an innocent selfish wish.

And it was a selfish wish that would absolutely never be granted, Yuna pursed her lips

tightly.

(–I can't blame myself for thinking it though, huh. I should sleep soon. Before I catch a cold.)

The night wind was slightly cool to her skin. Although it was pleasant, it still wasn't good to expose her body to it like this for a long period of time. Running away from her thoughts with painful reluctance, Yuna quietly pulled her body away from the balcony. Suddenly, when she returned her gaze to her room, its tasteless atmosphere induced an inevitable sense of loneliness.

Breathing out a single breath, Yuna sank into bed.

(Like I thought, I'm not cut out for living like a noble.)

Smiling wryly at how the core of her heart still had the nature of a commoner, Yuna closed her eyes.

†

The morning of the next day, Yuna washed her face like usual and let her maids help her dress like usual. Standing in front of the full-length mirror, she checked to make sure her clothes and hair weren't disordered. Alright, she muttered in her mouth.

Last night she had gotten lost in thought. The various things she had tried not to think about during the day had flowed copiously and then, like a fountain, gushed out one after another to swallow Yuna. In that moment, she felt like she hadn't been the "saint" or "Celiastina", but she also wasn't the past "Yuna" either.

At times, she grew scared. Right here and now, just who was she? Where was she heading? Was she moving forward, or had she not even moved a step? Each time that happened, she shook off her doubts and did nothing but think of the future.

The light of day was kind to Yuna. Under the bright sunlight, she could be released from her imposing and revolving conflicts. She was able to think innocently on how she would try her best today as well.

(Yes, today I'll go and ask Linus.)

Her reflection in the full-length mirror nodded. And then a light knock sounded. When she opened the door, Linus stood there relaxed and with good timing.

“Good morning.”

“Morning, Linus.”

Linus gave a single yawn and she felt like the color of his face wasn’t well, but maybe he’s been busy with work.

“Nothing has changed for you, right, Celia?”

Occasionally, Linus would come to check in on Yuna. It depended on his whim and so the pace wasn’t decided, but his arrival this morning was just in time. Yuna gave him a sweet smile.

“Linus, since you’re here, come in. Let me pour you some tea.”

“.....what’s with that smile?”

Linus entered the room, looking like he saw something suspicious.

“I don’t want tea, thank you. You have something you want from me, don’t you?”

As expected of Linus, he could see right through to Yuna’s thoughts.

“.....Mhm, um, I have a request.”

“What is it?”

“I– still want to meet directly with the people who were hurt by the Holy Jail. No matter what.”

“.....Oh dear.”

Fuu, he gave a deep sigh.

“You’re still going to ask that?”

Linus showed a wry smile, like he was chiding an unreasonable child. But Yuna did not



withdraw.

“I stayed in my rooms for about a week. During that time, I had the chance to talk to a lot of people. I listened to those various opinions from various people. And I also thought about things on my own. I think it’s true that, like you said, I will aggravate the victims if they see me. But if I just avoid them and run away then I wouldn’t be moving forward at all. I want to face a lot more people. This might just be my selfish thoughts, but I’d like you to forgive me for that.”

“Hmmm.....”

In spite of her desperate appeal, Linus didn’t look like he had any intentions of consenting. Please, she clasped both hands, and looked up at that hard-to-please face. However, it looked like the damp eyes of an uncommonly beautiful woman wasn’t enough to touch Linus’ heart.

“You know, how about you try spending your time a little more smartly?”

“Eh, what do you mean?”

“Why is it that you feel like you must confront everything directly before you can settle down? It’s so overwhelming that if it were me I would be in a cold sweat.”

“How could you say that!”

“If possible, I’d like you to be more obedient and quiet. Just thinking about something happening to you makes me shudder. I’m worried for you.”

“Really? Isn’t it just because you’ll have to take care of more things?”

“How could you say that!”

Linus purposefully imitated Yuna’s tone, and pursed his lips.

“.....that’s creepy, Linus.”

“Anyway, you don’t know the feelings of a parent yet. A parent loves how single-minded and passionate their child can be, but at the same time they’re scared.”

“I myself don’t think that I’m really that straightforward of a person. If I hadn’t been

placed in this situation then I don't know if I would be able to do the same thing. I think that's dishonest. But, right now, I think I want to try living honestly and straight."

She only had a little life left. That preciousness urges her on and drives her body more than any moment she's been through up to now.

"-Hum. I have no choice, if you're going to say it like that then I won't oppose you any longer."

"Really-"

"However. I cannot allow you to meet with the victims alone. You will take your bodyguard with you."

"My bodyguard?"

"Yep, you might not know this yet but Asyut prepared someone interesting."

"Could it be Aeneas.....?"

No, Linus denied it shortly.

"But, well, that also seems like it'll become interesting in its own way."

"Interesting?"

"Yes, interesting."

With a mysterious smile, Linus closed his mouth on that note. That smile looked like it contained all the secrets in the world- Yuna looked up at the heavens upon feeling that.

†

The training ground near the purification rooms was normally a quiet place.

It wasn't very wide and there were no special facilities, but the number of people that came by this place was extremely small. For the sake of not passing by the corridor that the saint frequently walks through, the knights themselves decided independently to refrain from entering. In fact, the only people who used this training

ground was Ashut, the leader of the Order of Holy Knights, and Siegcrest, the vice-captain.

Even now, Asyut was the only person in the unpopulated corridor as he walked towards the training ground.

However it wasn't to practice his swordsmanship. It was to have a secret bout with a certain person.

When he opened the door to the simple training ground, there was already a person in there. It was Aeneas.

He stood upright with a terribly nervous expression, but he didn't make the slightest movement. Upon noticing Asyut's appearance, he gave a quick bow and then returned to his previous stance.

"You are Aeneas Noah Delray, right?"

Asyut confirmed the other's name in a sharp voice. He did not come here today as an ordinary person, but was here as the kingdom's First Holy Knight. His intentions were to let his opponent know this implicitly.

Aeneas, who was facing him, seemed to be more than aware of this. With a tight expression that did not slacken for even one minute, Aeneas gave a short affirmation.

—It was an expression that indicated that he seemed to already understand what was going on. Looks like he was an intelligent man.

Asyut evaluated this young man, who he was meeting face-to-face for the first time, like that. Even though Aeneas must have known nothing, he didn't show a frightened or confused face, and instead quietly returned Asyut's gaze. A man of average measures wouldn't have been able to do this.

"I apologize for calling you out here while you were busy. Let us finish this matter quickly."

Only saying that, Asyut drew out his long sword from its sheath in a flowing motion.

"I want to know your ability. You are going to be my opponent."

Taken aback, Aeneas also dropped his hand to his own sword. After seeing that, Asyut leapt towards the other's chest without an indication.

He gave Aeneas more than enough time to react, raising the sword in a large motion and then slowly bringing it down. Aeneas, who was in the act of drawing his sword, stopped the blow firmly. But his torso was inadequately defended. If Asyut pulled back his sword and swung it sideways then he would certainly cut his opponent in two. He decided that in an instant, but took it upon himself to retreat one step back. His objective wasn't to kill his opponent.

In the slight pause, Aeneas' face twisted and became strained. His expression seemed to be asking "Why did you back off?". Aeneas himself understood that in the opportunity just now, this match could have been settled already.

(If he can conclude that from that moment then he's not a man who cannot use a sword.)

This time, without holding back like he did before, Asyut rushed towards Aeneas instantly and swung his sword upwards. But Aeneas also stopped this swing with nice timing. And then Aeneas jumped back agilely like that to maintain distance.



However, Asyut did not wait. He stepped towards Aeneas even more and lunged with his sharp sword. Aeneas, who hadn't adjusted his stance, had to tilt his body in an unnatural state and raise his left leg–

(You can't avoid this!)

Is what Asyut thought. He could already see underneath his eyelids just how his own sword would pierce Aeneas.

But.

–Asyut's blade sliced through the air.

In that moment.

Asyut felt a flash in his head, and moved his sword intuitively at the same time he turned around.

The screeching noise of a blade striking another blade split the air.

It was Aeneas' blow. Not only did he evade an attack from that posture but, in an instant, went around to Asyut's blind spot to counterattack.

(This guy.....)

Furthermore, Aeneas did not loosen his hand that he swung down. He saw Asyut holding his sword in one hand as a chance and was going to face down his opposition with all his strength in a duel with their swords locked like this. But Asyut had no intention of competing in this stance. He intentionally pulled back the hand holding his sword, but his body was already moving to Aeneas' side. Aeneas immediately followed Asyut with his eyes, but his body couldn't catch up.

(Too slow.)

In his mind, Asyut cried this out in a thundering voice. He had that much luxury.

And then Asyut aimed accurately at Aeneas' hand. With a sharp sound, Aeneas' blade went flying.

“–!”

Aeneas glanced at his hand, where his sword went flying from, but then immediately looked back at Asyut. His eyes were steady. In the distance, there was the dry sound of his sword tumbling across the ground but he didn't look over there at all.

(He doesn't seem discomposed.)

In a state where both of his hands were virtually empty, his concentration wasn't interrupted at all. Because this was a bout, Aeneas understood that a conclusion had been reached. But if they had been trying to kill each other, then he would have never given up.

(But.)

Even so, this was just a bout to the very end.

(If this had been a death match, I wouldn't have stopped at just sending his sword flying.)

Asyut placed his sword into its sheath. In that second, the air that had been stretched relaxed somewhat.

"I was completely defeated."

Aeneas muttered in frustration. It was likely that, from the start, he didn't think he could win against Asyut. But, at the same time, he must have thought that they wouldn't reach a settlement so quickly. He understood completely the insufficiency of his own ability but still frustrating things were frustrating. Asyut thought that, like Siegcrest said, Aeneas seemed to be a single-minded man.

"You still have a ways to go."

".....Yes, ser."

Aeneas clenched his fist. Was he unable to endure his own disappointing self? Or was he preparing himself to receive the words that Asyut was going to say now. Perhaps it might have been a bit of both.

"Do you know why I called you out here and suddenly faced you with a sword?"

"I think I know."

“I see. Then, you must know what I’m going to say now, right?”

“.....Yes.”

Aeneas raised his lowered face and looked straight at Asyut.

“I am aware that it is impudent of me to not know my standing and state that I would like to serve as Lady Celiastina’s bodyguard with this level of swordsmanship.”

Asyut nodded. Yes, he wanted to say these words to Aeneas. If he was unable to actively wipe the slate clean on the matter of bodyguards then he had no step other than to have Aeneas withdraw from his end. If it was the present Celiastina then she might possibly consent to Aeneas, who was not to blame, for his withdrawal.

However, even though Asyut heard the words he had imagined, he felt his own feelings drift far away from “satisfication”.

Maybe it hadn’t been good to cross swords? Even though it was a short time, he felt Aeneas’ serious feelings flow into him through his sword. Was it okay for him to break Aeneas’ will in this way? Even if it was for the sake of his family, wasn’t it going against what he himself wanted? Such thoughts were raised at this point in time.

“However, Lord Asyut.”

Aeneas still opened his mouth. When Asyut looked at those eyes, the light in them hadn’t been lost at all. –Ah, this man hasn’t given up. Knowing that, Asyut was secretly relieved.

“I did not put out my request because I was confident in my own swordsmanship. It was because I want to protect Lady Celiastina with these hands. Just this emotion.”

“Why do you feel that?”

“.....”

“It’s strange, isn’t it? It doesn’t make any sense. What on earth has the saint brought to you? What was given was just a heart of hatred and despair.”

It was truly nothing but strange. He wanted to protect Celiastina with a sword in hand? Wasn’t Celiastina the one who he should be pointing that sword at? At the very least,



Asyut himself was unable to hold a sword in front of that dreadful woman– or he would commit a mistake that he could not commit.

Looking back at him, Asyut could not see any clouds in Aeneas' eyes. He was an idiotic man. Asyut could tell just by looking. He knew from crossing swords. But what he didn't understand was why this kind of man trusted "that" saint.

".....I myself don't understand it very well."

Aeneas opened his mouth in wonderment.

"But when we were in the Holy Jail, together in that extreme situation, I felt like I was able to touch a deep part of Lady Celiastina, a part of her that was not a lie. It wasn't like anything special happened in that place. Even I don't really understand. It's just, in that moment, my heart was touched greatly by that person. To the point where all my hatred and resentment up to then was erased."

Were those even things that could disappear? Out of character, Asyut was driven with the urge to refute Aeneas in a raised voice. The thing called hate couldn't be so easily purified. It built a nest in the darkest parts of a heart, and ate at a person. And that was why he was suffering, right? To this extent.

"Even now these feelings of mine confuse me. But that is exactly why I want to be by her side more. I want to know her, the things about Lady Celiastina."

Aeneas lowered his head deeply.

"Lord Asyut, please, I ask of you to allow me to serve as Lady Celiastina's bodyguard. I will train every day, and devote myself to acquiring an adequate strength."

"But."

"About this, no matter what happens later, I will have no regrets."

"Wait. Lady Celiastina is dangerous. Certainly, she might look calm right now but you cannot think of that as her true nature. One day, again, a day will come when she will betray you."

"Even then. I do not want to turn my back on my present feelings, fearing betrayal in the future."

–He couldn’t overturn this man’s feelings.

Asyut realized.

He was scandalized at Aeneas’ recklessness and genuineness. But at the same time he thought it was dazzling.

–And.

“.....”

“Lord Asyut?”

“Ah, it’s nothing.”

Asyut himself lost his bearings in the doubts that were born inside of him.

(“I want to know more about Lady Celiastina”, huh.)

He could not forget the agony of that moment. Even now, hatred smouldered inside of his chest. So as to not show that on the outside, he tried to the best of his ability not to be close to the saint. But what about now? Little by little, he was unable to avert his eyes from her. Inadvertently, there was a part of him that was curious about her.

(The only thing she did was release everyone from the Holy Jail, no?)

Did that one single action change his evaluation of Celiastina inside of him? Even though it could have simply been nothing more than a whim.

(–No.)

That wasn’t it. He knew. Everything started on that night. Since he caught her eyes below that cliff.

In that moment, everything up to then was changed by something decisively.

Asyut gave his head a small shake. Closed his eyes. He wasn’t going to face Celiastina. He wasn’t going to think deeply on the saint’s words. If he didn’t do that, then sooner or later the carpet would be pulled from under him. If he collapsed this time, there was a chance he wouldn’t be able to stand up again– like that time.

Before he knew it, his mouth had become parched and dry, and Asyut swallowed hard.

That noise resounded violently in his ears.

†

Yuna was waiting until it became noon to go and visit the victims of the Holy Jail. According to Linus, that meant she had to go towards an infirmary that was dedicated to the Holy Jail victims.

Linus warned her about going alone and so she was waiting in her room for her bodyguard to come and pick her up. As Yuna walked back and forth through her room, she found the slowly passing time vexing.

“Yo, looks like I made you wait, Celia.”

Yuna, who had been adjusting her bed sheets meaninglessly, raised her head in surprise upon hearing an unannounced voice that came from her door which had been opened suddenly without a knock.

“Sieg!”

Just like the time she met him the other day, a large man in a worn white uniform stood leaning against the entrance to her room.

“Did something happen?”

“Did something happen, you ask. You’re going to go to the victims of the Holy Jail from here, right? I’m that bodyguard.”

“You, Sieg?”

She was sure that Siecrest was the vice-captain of the Order of Holy Knights, right?

“I’m just gonna say this once, but I didn’t take on being your bodyguard. It was pushed onto me by that guy, Asyut. Geez, he’s a high-handed fellow, that one.”

“I-I don’t know what to say, um…… sorry.”

“Well, it’s okay since it’s just for a limited time. In the end, it looks like Aeneas will be

your official bodyguard.”

He didn’t seem to be saying it in a nice manner. But, in spite of everything, Aeneas was going to be her bodyguard, huh. Yuna felt happy yet apologetic; it was a complex feeling.

“It’d be great if that Neisan dude doesn’t suggest to wanting to be your bodyguard too.”

“Couldn’t you have refused, Sieg?”

“Even if I wanted to refuse, I can’t. Because it’s an order from that demon, Asyut. That guy is a man who will definitely go through with something once he decides on it. That’s why even I was surprised about the Aeneas thing though.”

“The Aeneas thing?”

“Everyone was opposed to Aeneas serving as a bodyguard. Asyut was the same. He should have gone to persuade Aeneas by force but, something happened, and conversely he came back moved. Celia, did you hear anything from him..... nah, there’s no way you could have, huh.”

Unfortunately, she didn’t hear about anything. There was no way Asyut would approach her to talk about anything that wasn’t necessary.

“Never mind that though, you’ve changed your clothes quite a bit, haven’t you?”

Siegcrest looked Yuna up and down with interest. Right now Yuna was wearing casual pants underneath her knee-length dress. Her long hair was also gathered simply into a ponytail, and she was wearing easy-to-move-in sandals on her feet.

“I thought it’d be hard to move in my usual fluttering clothes.”

“Hey now, what are you going to do there? You’re not going to a duel like a certain someone, right?”

Yuna smiled ambiguously and left her room.

As she walked down the long hallway, she noticed – despite not wanting to – that the greetings from the servants who passed her were even more awkward than usual. It looked like Yuna being in casual clothes was making everyone extremely uneasy. They must have been wondering what was going to happen this time, or whether a disaster would befall them. She could understand everyone's thoughts like she was picking them up. It was painful for Yuna to see everyone's stiff faces due to nervousness, to the extent where she unconsciously looked down. But this deep trench couldn't be filled so easily.

"What're you going to do when you meet the victims?"

Siegcrest, who had kept quiet and walked half a step behind, suddenly asked a question.

".....Good point."

Yuna, who had been looking down the hallway, raised her head and let her gaze wander aimlessly through the empty air.

"Do you think it's better for me not to go and see them?"

"Well, it's complicated."

"I think so too. But, in spite of that, I want to help out and be of some use. Like cleaning the room, changing the sheets, or something like that."

"You're just going there for a bit and then helping out for a bit. There's not much meaning in that, right?"

"That's right. If possible, I was thinking of going there every day though."

Beside her, Siegcrest suddenly stopped.

"Wait, wait. Hey, hold on."

"I'm not saying this for the sake of atoning. More than that, I want to do something for those who were hurt."

“No, I’m not talking about that. E-Every day?”

“Yes.”

“Um, do you know? If you’re going there every day then that means I also have to go there every day.”

“Now that you mention it, that’s right. Thank you in advance.”

Yuna bowed her head courteously.

“Hey, hey, hey. Don’t joke around. Who do you think I am? Someone who has that much free time?”

“I don’t think that.”

“Then, how about thinking a little on my situation? It’d be sad if I died from overworking, right?”

“.....”

Yuna tilted her head slightly.

“I’m not going to think about that. Because, I’m a selfish saint.”

“Don’t turn on me at a time like this!”

Siegcrest had an expression that couldn’t be called anything other than disheartened. Even though she felt apologetic to him, Yuna was unable to apologize.

When they passed through the long hallway, this time elegant pillars lined a cloister on their left and right. Their surroundings was plain courtyard where a small amount of trees and flowers swayed in the wind. Beyond the straight hallway, on the other side, there was a tall wall painted white. A sturdy door was closed tightly, and Yuna couldn’t imagine what kind of atmosphere was spread on the other side of the door. – This was the infirmary.

Siegcrest slowly opened the door. The soft smell of freshly washed sheets tickled Yuna’s nose.

It was a very large and spacious room overflowing with cleanliness. On both sides of the room there were many large windows where the wind breezed in and rustled the curtains, making them sway. The room was quiet to the point where the only sound that could be heard was the rustling of the curtains. When she looked up, the bright light from the sun poured in through a large rounded skylight and Yuna's eyes creased with delight.

What a gentle place. But there was another person inside of her that felt at a loss in this scenery. That "feeling" appealed earnestly at Yuna to run away from this place. It's okay, it's okay, Yuna repeated many times.

"This is the place, huh."

Siegcrest whispered softly. It was a very delicate voice coming from someone who looked as rough as him. In the beds, which were placed at large intervals, there were people sleeping. They were none other than the victims of the Holy Jail.

"Mm, it looks like everyone is asleep."

Yuna murmured in a quiet voice.

However.

In that moment, the air in the room changed completely. There was a very distinct sound of rustling and crinkling sheets. The calm and peaceful room, in an instant, was wrapped in a hair-raising atmosphere.

Many beds squeaked dully.

—They were scared. Of Saint Celiastina who appeared all of a sudden.

They knew it was her just from her voice. And then they shrunk their bodies, stiffening. Yuna, who was shocked, could only stand stock still.

Someone came out from the back immediately. They must have noticed that the air in the infirmary became odd. It was a kind-looking middle-aged woman. When she noticed Yuna and Siegcrest, her small eyes widened as large as they could and she raised her voice in a high-pitch, going "Oh my, oh my".

"To think that you actually came here."

“U-Um.”

It looked like she decided to greet Yuna since she had seen her face. But it didn't seem like she was going to ask about anything specific. The woman approached Yuna and Siecrest with surprise and an imperceptible discomfiture.

“I apologize deeply for the lack of any welcome.”

“No, no, I'm the one who suddenly intruded. I must have surprised you, right? Sorry.”

Yuna bowed her head, flustered. The woman looked at Yuna with an even more surprised face.

“.....Besides, it looks like everyone is shocked because I came.”

“Ah, um, that seems to be the case. Not in their wildest dreams could they have imagined a noble like the saint coming to visit them.”

Yuna, Siecrest, and even the woman herself who said it knew of course that this was not the reason. Yuna didn't respond with anything in particular, and just gave a slight smile.

It looked like the people in the beds were holding their breath and secretly watching the three of them. Everyone had their blankets drawn up to their head and so she couldn't see their expressions. But the tension they felt that was painful to look at was conveyed firmly. Yuna was also hooked and wanted to shrink back but she scolded herself and took one step forward.

Startlement.

The blankets shook for a moment. It looked like even her footsteps caused their frightened bodies to stiffen. –Her existence was like a severe poison to them.

Yuna kept silent and lowered her head. How easy would it be to say “I'm sorry”. But she felt like she shouldn't say those words so lightly.

Even when she lifted her head after a long period, the injured people in the beds were unchangingly stiff, like they were frozen. She knew. Even if she said she was sorry here, it was impossible for her to receive a smile and a “Don't worry about it”. Yuna told herself that and then turned back to the woman.



“Um, uh...”

Yuna closed her mouth.

“Oh, forgive my rudeness. My name is Mislee.”

“Mislee, I have a request. Could you let me help out with taking care of everyone?”

“Huh?!”

Mislee raised her voice as if completely surprised.

“Something like wiping the floor, or washing dirty things. I’ll do anything that I can do. Though I have to attend ceremonies and so I might not be able to do this all the time.”

What is she saying all of a sudden?! That was written plainly on Mislee’s face. Siecrest had an exasperated expression, oh boy, and all he did was stare up at the heavens.

“S-Something like wiping the floor. I cannot let you do something like that.”

“I might not be able to help you much, but I want to do something.”

Mislee sent a look at Siecrest with a troubled expression. What should I do? She was implicitly seeking help.

“Isn’t it best to just let her do what she wants until she’s satisfied?”

Siecrest, being himself, had a careless air and it was impossible to think of him as someone who was temporarily the saint’s attendant.

“B-But!”

“-Ah!”

Ignoring Mislee, who was at a loss, Yuna raised her voice when she looked into the room at the back.

“Were you just about to wash things? In that case, please let me do that!”

Alert, she discovered a big laundry basket with a huge amount of white sheets inside.

Before Mislee could say anything, Yuna quickly lifted up the basket.

“Ack..... i-it’s surprisingly heavy. Sorry, but where’s the washing station?”

“W-Wait, wait, you mustn’t do that! The Lady Saint shouldn’t do those things.”

“Ah, I see a washing station in the back yard. I’m going to borrow that.”

Yuna interrupted Mislee’s words on purpose and quickly headed to the back yard. Mislee, who was left behind, stood still and was unable to catch up to this unexpected development. Siegcrest lightly patted her shoulder and muttered at her to leave the saint alone.

†

For a week, Yuna went to the infirmary every day like she said.

One day she brought fruits, and on another she brought flowers. Because everyone became frightened when Yuna came close, she swept the floor and folded the laundry as far away as she could wherever it was practicable. In the beginning, whenever she just stepped foot into this room there was another “feeling” that raised a bitter voice, but little by little it calmed down. From the fifth day, Mislee seemed to calm down when Yuna’s maid, Nasha, came to help take care of everyone too. It must have been mentally tiring on her to manage her routine duties alone together with the saint in the infirmary. At the beginning, Nasha was also very stiff from her nervousness, but after two days she was completely relaxed and able to perform her duties well.

“I’m sorry, Nasha, for you having to accompany me like this.”

“Oh no, please do not be concerned about that.”

The two of them stood side by side, busy washing. Yuna secretly looked at Nasha, beside her, but she couldn’t see any dissatisfaction on the girl’s face. –But, the maids themselves that accompanied her were all noble ladies. So doing something common like washing these dirty things by hand must be nothing but humiliation. But, this was just Yuna’s suspicion.

“.....You don’t mind this?”

“Yes, in fact, I’m used to this kind of work.”

“Used to?”

“Yes. I think you know already from my name but I am a commoner.”

So that’s how it was. Yuna looked at Nasha’s profile in surprise. It’s true that “Nasha” wasn’t a very noble-like name. Most aristocratic names were longer. But up to now – and even now – she hadn’t thought that Nasha came from a common background. Because there should have only been high ranking nobles around the saint.

“I apologize deeply for someone like me to serve beside the Lady Saint as a maid.”

“Why?! I’m happy!”

Yuna unintentionally let out a loud voice. Ah, was that why she felt a familiarity upon their first meeting? Because they were both commoners?

“H-Happy?”

“Yup, because I come from a common background too. It’s still very mentally draining. I feel like everyone around me is honestly more remarkable than I am. But, isn’t it unusual? There’s no other commoners around you, right?”

“Yes– um...”

Nasha spoke slowly, and ambiguously. Could it be... Yuna suddenly understood.

Was Nasha sent to serve under her as the so-called scapegoat? The closer a maid was to the saint, the higher the possibility of being caught in her vicious ways and having misfortune befall them. So that no one became like what happened to the saint’s bodyguards in the past, there might have been a fierce competition between the maids. And, in front of the saint who was acting increasingly strange, they placed a maid where if, by any chance, something were to happen then there would not be any trouble–. Nasha might have been that commoner maid chosen for that reason.

“I’m sorry. Things must have been hard.”

“Oh no! It’s not anything that Lady Celiastina has to apologize for.”

When she thought that, Yuna comprehended the nervousness in Nasha's eyes when she arrived to Yuna's side, at the beginning.

Celiastina, when you return, you won't hurt Nasha, right? Please, don't do such a thing. Yuna asked that other person in her chest. There was an unpleasant feeling that spread slowly, as if it were rejecting Nasha, but Yuna prayed strongly and pushed that back. –Even if you don't understand right now, realize it one day. The feeling of caring about someone, and the warmth it brings to one's self.

“Well, let's work hard, we just need to wash a bit more. Once this is done, you can rest, Nasha. I'll go back to my room after I'm done sweeping the room.”

Trying to regain the mood, Yuna deliberately spoke loudly.

“No, I will join you.”

Nasha, who smiled as she said that, had softened to a point where it wasn't even comparable to how she was on the first day. Just seeing that smile made Yuna's face naturally turn into a broad smile.

“–Now, how about a short break for the both of you? I've just poured us some delicious tea.”

Mislee, who popped her head out from the rear entrance of the room, called out to Yuna and Nasha in a bright voice.



When they returned to the infirmary, Siecrest was sitting in a chair, looking bored, and dozing. He looked bored but at the same time he looked content. That was how pleasant the room was and how it was wrapped in a refreshing air. It was all thanks to Mislee's attention to every nook and cranny.

The victims of the Holy Jail were still unaccustomed to Yuna. Whenever she was here, they covered their heads with their blankets and showed no reaction. But even still, their fear seemed to have weakened and they no longer shook and trembled by her just being in the same room.

Nevertheless, Yuna secretly looked at the victims. There was one thing she was curious

about.

–Neisan wasn't here.

Everyone was covered by a blanket and so she wasn't able to identify anyone individually, but from being together with Siecrest and looking at his attitude it didn't seem like she was mistaken in the fact that Neisan wasn't amongst them. The majority of the Holy Jail victims should have been recuperating here but was Neisan in another place with a small minority? In this one week, she was secretly worried, and felt like it was time for her to confirm this.

"Um, Sieg."

"Mm?"

Siecrest's voice was extremely languid. Was he really being a bodyguard for the saint?

"Neisan isn't here, is he?"

"Ah, that guy? He's recuperating in his own room."

"His own room?"

"Yep. He was quite hurt but in the last month it doesn't seem like he was tortured. During that time, he must practiced moving his body a little to the extent where you wouldn't think that he spent four months in that place, which is good. He really isn't an ordinary person. Because of his body, and his own wishes, it was okay for him to rest in his room. There are also others who are recovering in their own rooms, you know."

"Is that so."

"Don't think about intruding."

Suddenly sending her a sharp look, Siecrest restrained Yuna.

".....Eep, okay."

"I'm not saying that's a bad thing. It's just that guy is quite sensitive to the atmosphere around him, so you going there is a bit... Leave him alone and give him some more

time.”

“.....okay.”

Great, Siecrest nodded with satisfaction and then patted Yuna’s head. Mislee and Nasha, who were watching the situation, both sucked in their breath. It must have been because it was an unthinkable attitude for a bodyguard to have towards the saint. And, more importantly, she should have been a saint who wouldn’t be content to accept that treatment. But, in reality, in front of them was just a young girl who, as if sulking, pulled her shoulders in and made herself look small. The dignity of a saint could not be found anywhere.

Even the Holy Jail victims, who were concealing their breathing and hiding their bodies under the blankets, peeked their faces out a little from the blankets to look at Yuna.

“Now, it’s about time to head back, Celia.”

“H-Hold on, please wait. The laundry still needs to be dried and then once that’s done I have to sweep the floor.”

“Argh, stop! I’m busy too, you know! ‘Cause I have to go and put in an appearance at the knights’ training ground after this. You can leave the rest to Mislee and Nasha to do.”

“Sieg!”

During these five days, it was always this when Siecrest opened his mouth. From the moment they entered the infirmary, he would want to go home. It was true that this was a boring time for him though. In this place, those who would want to hurt Yuna, no matter their innermost thoughts, wouldn’t actually do it. It was also absurd for him to accompany Yuna in cleaning and washing. And so, as far as he was concerned, he had nothing to do. Every time Yuna met Linus too, she would bring to his attention that she didn’t need a bodyguard but he appeared to turn a deaf ear to that and would not respond.

“Alright, how about this then. I’ll take you with me to the knights’ training, Celia. You don’t go out often, right? Don’t you find it boring to just come and go from your room to ceremonies? Now that you’ve stretched your legs like this to the infirmary, I think it’ll definitely be fun to look around other places too.”

“I shouldn’t.....”

“Lady Celiastina, we will be fine here. I will handle the rest from here and, from time to time, you should accompany Lord Siecrest.”

Mislee said in a bright voice while smiling.

“U-Umm.”

“That’s right, Lady Celiastina. I will also help Mislee, so it’ll be okay.”

With even Nasha saying that, it didn’t seem like she could continue to remain here by force.

Besides, it was true that Siecrest had been accompanying her all this time because of her selfishness. Like what Mislee said, it might be good for her to go along with Siecrest’s suggestions once in a while. But to ignore the victims in front of her today was.....

Nasha and Mislee looked at each other carefully upon seeing Yuna fall completely silent. However, only Siecrest seemed to take that silence as an affirmative and, with an exaggerated nod, he took Yuna’s arm and stood up.

“Good, good, let’s go then. Everyone’ll probably be terrified and make a ruckus when they see you, Celia, but oh well don’t worry. If they become curious and make a pass at you, I won’t let any one of them lay a single finger on you.”

If one just listened to his last words then he sounded very knightly and reliable. But, somehow she wasn’t very happy about this situation. She felt like she was being treated like a rare animal in a circus tent, or maybe that was just her persecution complex?

At any rate, without being able to put up a resistance, Yuna was dragged out of the infirmary.

†

The knights’ training ground was in a small corner on the north side of the royal palace. It wasn’t like the training grounds of the soldiers, which was attached to a lively

place, rather it felt like a cut off and separate dignified place, with a strange feeling of pressure. While thinking that a place like this must certainly discipline a person and motivate them, Yuna followed after Siegcrest.

When the heavy door to the training ground was opened, the first thing that stole Yuna's eyes was the largeness. It wasn't just wide, even the ceiling was extremely tall. Inside the royal palace, there were many buildings that had unbelievably tall ceilings. To Yuna it was still a huge surprise, because during the time she lived in a village only a building like the church would be like this.

When she looked back down, after looking up at the ceiling for a while, the sight of dozens of knights swinging their blades entered her vision. As one would expect, they were not wearing the tight white uniforms but practice uniforms that were easy to move in, though there was no loss in the quality of the material. Their atmosphere was clearly different from the soldiers she had seen before.

One person noticed them and sent their gaze to them. And then, like a ripple, the awareness of the knights gradually concentrated on Siegcrest and the saint. Though Yuna felt uncomfortable, she couldn't do anything but accept their gazes in silence.

The knights who noticed the saint widened their eyes in startlement and then fell silent. The swords they held also lowered, and then everyone in the area stood upright. As one would expect of the Order of Holy Knights who value strictness, there was no fuss or noise. But it was easy to imagine the great shock they seem to have received.

"Yo, looks like everyone was training properly."

Siegcrest, the only one who seemed unconcerned with the atmosphere in this place, called out to the knights in a bright voice.

"I'm sure you guys already know but this is the Saint Celiastina. She said she wanted to take a field trip to see your guys' training and so I brought her. Anyway, don't worry about us and continue on with your training."

What irresponsible words. To Celiastina, and to the knights.

What should they do, the knights seemed to ask with their eyes as they started to look at each other. Why did the saint suddenly say she wanted to see their training? Why did she appear aimlessly in clothes unsuited for a saint? They must have had a lot of questions. However, more importantly, to do something like resuming their training



in front of the saint... they might have felt uneasy about doing anything to bring her wrath down on them.

It was only a short period of time that the knights exchanged glances with one another. Soon, their gazes gathered to one point in the very back. –Towards a black-haired and remarkably awe-inspiring young man.

(GYAHHHH!)

Inside her mind, Yuna screamed.

On the other side of the knights that separated them, Asyut stood in an imposing stance with his arms crossed and glared over at them. The pressure of silence. It was very scary. The other knights seemed to leave the development of events in this place up to Asyut's decision over Siecrest's. The gazes that were directed to and relying on Asyut were waiting on his words.

“Gah..... I mean, hey, Asyut. You came too, huh.”

“.....Because I asked you to be the bodyguard of the saint. In exchange, I'm taking part in the knights' training.”

“Hmm, I see. Nah, that really helps me. 'Cause I haven't been able to find any time to show my face here. I finally made some time right now.”

“And?”

Asyut's glare almost seemed to make a sound. Yuna instantly realized that anything said here was likely to anger him. And her thought was probably not mistaken.

“Why has the saint appeared together with you in a place like this?”

“Why, you ask. It's because Celia said she wanted to see everyone's training.”

Was it going to be her fault again? Yuna abandoned all the trust she ever placed on Siecrest. And then she secretly pinched his arm. Siecrest turned to look at her petulantly, but Yuna firmly glared back.

“Even so, a bodyguard would not so easily bring her along. This is a place where real swords are used in training. How will you take responsibility if anything were to

happen to the saint by chance.”

“Ah... mm. You’re right. My bad.”

Siegcrest didn’t seem to think he was in the wrong at all, but it looked like Asyut was used to that. He didn’t complain any more than that about Siegcrest’s attitude; instead, the furrow between his brows just deepened.

“Lady Celiastina.”

“Y-Yes!”

Reflexively, she replied and straightened her posture even more so than any knight in the area. Beside her Siegcrest burst into laughter.

“.....I will escort you back to your room. Siegcrest, I’m leaving the rest of the training to you. Do not slack and train them firmly.”

Like this, Yuna’s field trip to the knights ended in five minutes and she was to return to her room.

†

As they walked down the long hallway side by side, Yuna surreptitiously glanced at Asyut’s profile, which looked unhappy. He hadn’t said a single word since a while ago. To that Asyut, who only fixed his gaze straight ahead and continued walking, Yuna could do nothing but keep her mouth closed.

(This is awkward.)

By nature Asyut didn’t have a personality that was easy for people to get close to. But the way he had a presence of rejection to Yuna was unbearable to the point that it hurt.

Yuna, not having anything to do with her hands, linked them behind her back and looked down as she walked. Naturally, she fell behind Asyut. Each time that happened, Asyut would slow down his steps to match Yuna’s pace. And when she noticed that, Yuna would run up to Asyut hurriedly. This repeated many, many times.

(He shows that kind of concern even to someone he hates. I’m sure he’s doing it unconsciously.)

Asyut was strict to others, and definitely strict on himself. There must be a lot of people who are afraid of him. But there was a kindness too. Yuna thought that he really was a good person. And that's why it was sad to be so thoroughly hated by someone like that.

(What should I do?)

She suddenly looked up at the sky. From the large windows between the tall white walls and the roof, the soft rays of the sun shone in. What was on the other side of this wall? If only she was a good friend with Asyut, then she could suggest taking a small walk before returning to her room.

Before she knew it, being preoccupied with the sunlight, the space between her and Asyut opened up again. Asyut turned around and quietly stopped.

".....Lady Celiastina."

"I-I'm sorry."

Like a student who had been scolded by their teacher, Yuna shrunk her body and ran up to Asyut's side. The servants passing nearby looked at the two of them strangely. They must have thought that this was a very strange exchange.

"Is something the matter?"

"No, it's nothing. Sorry."

It looked like all she could do was apologize.

"I am not angry. I am simply thinking that it is strange. Last time, you were at the west side of the royal palace, and now this time here. Recently, I have been seeing you in completely inconceivable places."

"....."

"Incidentally, what is with those clothes today, too?"

Yuna's body suddenly stiffened when she was asked that. Her knee-length dress and simple pants. Come to think of it, this was the first time she's worn these clothes in front of Asyut. Easy to move in capri pants were one of Yuna's favorites, but she could

easily imagine that not being something Asyut would be pleased by.

“Uh, um, it’s quite easy to move in these.”

It was a lacking answer.

“All you did today was visit the victims of the Holy Jail, right? Why is it necessary to wear clothes that are easy to move in?”

There was no way she was going to say that she did things like wipe the floor and use a broom there.

“Did Siegcrest drag you into something idiotic again? If so, please tell me immediately.”

“No, I just like these clothes. It’s okay if I wear saint-like clothes properly when it’s time for ceremonies, right?”

“There is a problem if there are times when you are “like” a saint and “unlike” a saint.”

You’re mistaken, Yuna opposed strongly in her heart.

“Because, before I am a saint I am just a single human.”

Because it took her courage to oppose him, her voice was small but even so Yuna slowly said that. When she glanced at Asyut to gauge his reaction, just as she thought, he was frowning and looking down at her.

“I think of being the saint as something like a job. It’s a very, very important job but I don’t think of it as being everything.”

“If you are going to do that, are you not setting a bad example to the people who spend their days supporting the saint?”

“It’s not like everyone is living to support the saint though, right? Everyone has their own precious things. They have important things that are there for the sake of their own selves. It’s that kind of thing.”

She knew this well because she used to be a commoner. Who exactly would think about the saint every day in the middle of their lives? Who would think about the Holy Knights? Commoners were indifferent to those people who they didn’t know anything

about. What was much more important than the far away saint was the plan for the day's dinner or how they would spend tomorrow's holiday.

"That's why, it'd be nice if we could all be the same."

"Lady Celiastina."

Asyut interrupted in a monotonous voice. A stormy atmosphere slowly spread, similar to the time they quarreled in Yuna's room. But Asyut, unlike before, seemed to be consciously trying to suppress his emotions.

"I'm sorry, Asyut, but I—"

Yuna opened her mouth, immediately trying to find her next words. However, at that time, Asyut wasn't looking at Yuna. His black eyes were slightly widened— that gaze was looking at something behind Yuna.

Upon realizing that, Yuna reflexively turned. She turned around.

And then she unconsciously held her breath.

There, right beside her, was an unfamiliar young man.

At the same time Yuna moved to turn around, the man spoke in a low voice.

"Celiastina, I've finally caught you—!"

# Chapter Seven

Everything that happened after that passed by in an instant.

The silhouette of the tanned man suddenly became larger. He lifted his right hand up with great force and, the moment she realized that, he swung it down. She could hear the sharp sound of the passing wind by her ears. And then, roughly at the same time, a dull shock impacted against her. Yuna was completely confused. In that moment, her entire body had judged that she was going to be attacked by that unfamiliar man. But the coldness of the ground striking her cheek brought Yuna's consciousness back to reality.

Right now, Yuna was lying on the ground. The one who had pushed her and thrown himself on top to cover her was– Asyut.

By the time Yuna managed to raise her upper body, Asyut had already brought himself up to a knee and was guarding her against their opponent.

The person who assaulted her was someone who was around the same age as Asyut. He gripped a dagger in his right hand. And he was looking down at Asyut and Yuna with hatred burning in his eyes. There was an unthinkable strength that poured out of him, despite his haggard appearance, but Yuna trembled with fear just from his appearance.

“–Don't get in my way!”

Shouting, the man leapt at them again. Asyut placed a hand on the handle of his sword, but he didn't move and simply glared at the other person. As the distance shrank, Yuna was unable to bear it and gave a small scream. Right at that moment, a thick arm stretched out from behind the man and twisted the right hand of the man strongly. Like that, the man's body was thrown into the air and then immediately hit the ground.

“Guah!”

The owner of that arm was Siecrest. Placing his weight on the man's back, Siecrest skillfully held the man down so that he could not move an inch.

“...whew, that was a close call. I’m glad I came to check on you two.”

It was around that time that their surroundings started to make a commotion. Everyone who had been here hadn’t been able to move during those sudden events. But the spell was broken, and it seemed like everyone started to realize the abnormality of the situation.

“Wretch, there is no way you don’t know who this lady is. You must understand what you’ve done, right!?”

Asyut, who had stood up, questioned the man harshly.

“There’s no way I wouldn’t know!!”

Even though the man was held down by Siegcrest, he was able to answer firmly.

“As if I could forget this woman’s face! The saint, more horrible than any demon, Celiastina! That’s right, I’m going to kill you. I’ll definitely– kill you. I’LL KILL YOU!!”

Yuna lost her words at the shouts of the man, who seemed to be peering into madness.

This excessively violent and deep hatred. –His murderous intent.

It wasn’t something she could take. Unconsciously, Yuna took a step back. But, as if caught, she felt herself getting drawn into those burning eyes.

“On top of committing this kind of violence towards the saint, you would still mock her!?”

“I did it knowing that I would die, do you think I’d care?!”

The man shouted wildly, uncaring about the pressure from Asyut.

“This woman stole everything from me! The happiness I finally got! Give me back Rin, give her back.....!!”

“I won’t listen to your nonsense. Guards, take this man to the prison immediately.”

“–Wait!”

Yuna's voice, which was out of place, broke in. She had shouted instinctively.

"Lady Celiastina!"

"It's fine, let him speak. I'll listen to everything he wants to say."

Reining in Asyut, who had objected, Yuna faced the man. His eyes widened, as if in disbelief, but then his expression was immediately dominated by a furious anger.

"What, are you pretending to have mercy at this point in time?! What's the point of that! You stole everything from me. Our future, our smiles, and even our meager happiness!"

"....."

"Why did you kill Rin?! Why did you kill my wife!? Why couldn't you just have killed me. Why was it Rin!? What did she do?! Isn't that absolutely mad?!"

—She remembered. He was the young man who had been imprisoned in the Holy Jail. On the night she had visited the Holy Jail, he was that voice who had begged her to spare just Rin—.

"I absolutely won't forgive you. I WON'T FORGIVE YOU!!"

The man struggled violently, even though he was held down, but he was unable to thrust aside Siecrest. But still, somehow his right hand escaped its restraint and crawled along the ground for the dagger that had been thrown down beside him.

"I won't let you!"

Asyut quickly kicked the dagger, and it made a light sound as it tumbled across the stone floor. Yuna picked up the dagger, which had rolled close to her, and felt its coldness in the palm of her hand.

In the moment where Yuna's attention had been stolen by the dagger, the man was pressed down to the ground again by several patrolling guards, including Siecrest.

"Guh, let me go!"

"To think that you would still try to harm Lady Celiastina even now. Do you want to



lose your neck here?”

With cold eyes, Asyut drew his sword this time.

The man’s shoulders trembled at the clear sound of the sword blade leaving its sheath. At the same time, Yuna felt like her heart was being seized. –During the Ceremony of Worship, there was a black shape crawling on the ground, and soldiers who looked down at it. And then it was killed all too soon– the poisonous bug.

“Wait, Asyut!”

Yuna ran up to Asyut as if she sprung to him. And then she held his left hand and looked up at him desperately.

“Stop, don’t kill him!!”

“Lady Celiastina, please step back. In any case, this man will receive capital punishment. We cannot allow you to be hurt by any chance.”

“I said no! Because, I don’t even have a single scratch. For that to be a capital punishment is crazy!”

“You’re saying that? –Borrowing this person’s words, you’re saying that at this point in time?”

The gaze he had directed at the man moved onto Yuna. There was also a flicker of hatred in Asyut’s eyes.

“No, no! I don’t care if it’s too late! You absolutely can’t kill this person!”

“Lady Celiastina.”

Irritated from the bottom of his heart, Asyut sighed. Siegcrest, who had been silent up to now, rebuked Celiastina in a low voice.

“Hey, Celia, I told you to correct your selfishness, right? To direct a violent towards the saint is an act that is definitely not allowed. It’s natural for that to be a capital punishment.”

“But originally this person’s wife was.....”

“EVEN THEN!”

Siegcrest’s voice was rough and Yuna shrank her body at that.

“Don’t you understand? If you forgive this person here, the royal palace will fall into chaos. No one would be punished for carrying out their revenge on the hated saint. There will definitely be lots of people, knights like me, who will come out. Because there are heaps of people who hate the saint.”

“.....ah.”

It was such a sound argument that Yuna couldn’t say anything back. –The seeds sown by Celiastina had grown large, and those vines were now chasing her wherever she went and entwining around her. Was he saying that if she overlooked this man right here then the resentment towards her will just increase even more?

“We have to settle this in front of everyone who is watching. This is the duty of those who stand at the top. That is why Asyut will harden his heart and execute this man. Listen, Celia, the death of this man for your sake will stain Asyut’s hands. Do not forget that.”

Something like that. Such a thing–.

Her vision grew dark. Siegcrest wasn’t wrong. She was sure she was the one who was wrong. But if the only thing gained from pursuing a proper path was just suffering then, even so, was she supposed to withdraw?

–No.

Yuna thought this strongly.

Whether this was selfishness or arrogance, or if she was told that she wasn’t thinking about anything or the outlook of the circumstances and future of her surroundings, she didn’t want to hurt the people she could reach any more. She wasn’t going to let such a thing repeat anymore, never.

“No.”

“Celia–“

“You absolutely can’t! How can you take a life so easily? He’s alive. Right now, this person is alive. He’s someone who can continue living, even into the future, I’m sure. Please understand just how precious that is.”

Siegcrest had a sour face.

“Celia. People like us are humans who have made fighting their livelihood. Do you think we easily kill people without thinking anything? That’s impossible. It’s obvious we understand, what it means to take the life of a person. It is on top of that which we are saying this man should be executed.”

They didn’t actually understand! Yuna’s body trembled from the shout that welled up from the bottom of her heart. The tomorrow that was to come was never going to happen for an eternity; they were surely unable to really understand that meaning. Even she didn’t know– a bird that flies straight through the blue sky, the trees that rustle and shake their bodies to the passing of a gentle wind, the soft and sweet smell of flowers shone on from sunlight filtering through the trees... just what exactly did it mean for this “world” that she could react to with her whole body to be lost forever? And, surely, she would never know. How big that “world” was supposed to have spread over a long, long time–.

Yuna put strength into her hands that clung to Asyut.

“I’m begging you, don’t kill him. Please.....!”

And then she kneeled like that. Seeing that, everyone in the area became speechless. Of course Asyut did, the passerbys who were watching the course of these events, Siegcrest who was holding the man down, and even the man himself who was being held down. Everyone was looking in mute amazement at the saint who had lowered her head.

Fuu, Siegcrest exhaled a deep sigh. What do we do, he pestered Asyut with just his eyes. Asyut, who received that gaze, had an unpleasant expression, of course, and the furrow between his brows deepened.

“.....It looks like Lady Celiastina will not be pleased to have dirty blood flowing in front of her. But then that is very natural. To sever the neck of this manservant in front of the saint, who is the messenger of God, was a foolish manner for me to have. Please, I beseech you to forgive me.”

With an expression that oozed irritation, Asyut faced Yuna and bowed formally in a knightly style.

“Then–“

“For the moment, let us transfer this man to the prison. Afterwards, the appropriate measures will be taken.”

“–That’s!”

“Siegcrest.”

Asyut interrupted the saint’s criticism and quickly called out to his friend beside him.

“Sorry, but take this man to the prison together with the guards. I will take Lady Celiastina back to her room.”

“Aa, got it.”

“W-Wait. What I want to say is–“

“Now then, everyone, return to your stations. It is forbidden to make a fuss about this carelessly.”

This time it looked like no matter what happened he wasn’t going to defer to her. Ignoring Yuna completely, Asyut ordered the people in their surroundings with a firm attitude. In this way, an atmosphere spread all at once of this being an issue that was settled. The people who had been standing still and watching the development of events, each and every one scattered quickly without saying a word. And then what remained behind was Yuna, who was stunned and still clinging to Asyut’s arm, and Asyut who looked down at her with an indescribable expression.

“Lady Celiastina, you should return as well. It would be best for you to compose yourself in your room.”

–Horrible. Horrible, horrible.

Calm down in her room? How could he say such a thing calmly. Even though someone had been about to lose their life in front of their own eyes.

Her anger bubbled and welled up but she couldn't strike Asyut with it. –In the first place the main cause was Celiastina. And that Celiastina right now was none other than herself. If it had been Celiastina in the past, she might have even drank her tea calmly in this situation.

–Horrible. Horrible, horrible. Horrible–!

Just what was? She didn't know anymore. What was she being so angry towards? Yuna suddenly felt exhausted and was driven with the urge to collapse on the spot.

†

Returning to her room, Yuna threw her body onto a sofa with a thud. Exhausted. She was completely exhausted.

Asyut, who came in following her, eyed Yuna, who had her head dropped, calmly and closed the door behind him. Yuna, who thought he would have immediately left once he escorted her to her room, raised her head questioningly at his action.

“You appear to be quite concerned about that person.”

Yuna only stared blankly at Asyut.

“Lady Celiastina, you should still be missing your memories and so you must not know of who that person is, correct?”

She gave a small nod.

“His name is Duo Ulugh. He lived in the royal palace and worked as a cook. Recently, he brought his fiancée to the palace and they had just married. Originally, the motive for Duo's imprisonment was that there was something like a small stone in your soup, Lady Celiastina. The one who made that soup was Duo, and so you called him. The conversation became an argument and the result was Duo being sent to the Holy Jail.”

Of course this was the first time she heard this, but she wasn't very shocked. She already knew without a doubt that the excuse for what happened was a small thing.

“It was my orders to execute Rin, right?”

“.....Yes.”

“I heard Duo’s voice in the Holy Jail. He was shouting... that he didn’t care what happened to him and that he just wanted Rin saved.”

Perhaps she should have confronted him the moment she heard his voice.

Most likely that would have already been too late. Because it was after Rin had been executed by Celiastina’s orders. Even so, if she had talked to him properly that night, and maybe this was nothing more than her conceit, but perhaps he wouldn’t have done something to get him imprisoned again.

“.....Asyut, could you let me be alone for a while? You can go home now.”

Yuna muttered this without any strength. And yet Asyut, who received those words, did not move at all.

“Please, I want to be alone.”

Right now, she couldn’t bear to be beside anyone. Yuna tried to keep back, one way or another, the part of her that wanted to lash out unreasonably. She wanted to throw an outburst, she wanted to hit someone with this anger and irritation that had no outlet.

But Asyut did not leave.

“Lady Celiastina, if it is your command, then even the laws of this country can be overruled.”

It was a quiet voice.

“If you say you do not want that person to be executed then no one, no matter who they are, would be able to lay a hand on him.”

“.....But, but, just then–“

“Yes, Siecrest and I opposed that. Because we believe that one should refrain from abusing one’s authority like that. If one passes their own unreasonable demands, then it will buy great animosity from the common people. And not just that. This time, like Siecrest said, this could also expose you directly to danger.”

“.....”

At Asyut's voice, which was persistently calm and quiet, Yuna was naturally brought back to calmness.

"It is necessary for you to understand your own position more. Furthermore, I as the First Holy Knight and Siecrest as the vice-captain of the Order of Holy Knights, cannot so easily accept your selfish requests on the spot, or else the displeasure of the people there will be amplified... Right now, the royal palace is like a microcosm of the relationship between this country and the saint."

".....That may be true, but--"

"Do not think that things will go well as long as one follows their morals."

"....."

Yuna lowered her head and bit her lip. Asyut wasn't wrong. A death penalty on those who worked to harm an important person was this country's law. And so sentencing Duo in that case was the proper course of action. She herself thought that she shouldn't brandish around the saint's authority, and she agreed with Asyut and the others that doing that wouldn't be desirable.

-But.

"Even so, I want to spare that person."

Hearing those words, Asyut quietly closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry, but I just can't let that happen no matter what. If someone important to me had been hurt, then I'd be the same and I wouldn't be able to forgive the saint."

Haltingly, she changed the whirlpool of thoughts inside her into words. As he heard her words, Asyut's face twisted as if in pain.

"Lady Celiastina, you are the saint of this country. You cannot make decisions based on your feelings."

"No, that's not it. Like I said before, I cannot be the "saint" when someone's life is concerned."

"Lady Celiastina."

“Asyut, you would understand that person’s feelings, right? You wouldn’t be able to forgive me for executing that person and then walking around the royal palace looking like I owned the place, right? Please, say it. Say that you won’t execute that person.”

Asyut shook his head. That his expression looked like he was about to cry was surely just her imagination.

“.....You really have lost your memories, haven’t you.”

“Eh?”

Nevermind, he only answered in a low voice.

“I must fulfill the role that was granted to me. Even when a person’s life is concerned. Lady Celiastina, please withdraw your words. If you do not, then we will only continue to talk past each other.”

“I can’t do that! If you say my orders are absolute then, please, spare that person. If he is in jail, then release him immediately!”

“You have been told repeatedly that doing so will change the entire atmosphere in this royal palace. If, by some chance, there is an increase in the people who wish to harm you then we may not be able to protect you. This person, Duo, had been regarded as dangerous after the liberation of the Holy Jail. And yet this situation happened when we had been paying close attention to him so that he would not come near you. What will happen if the royal palace falls into even more confusion?”

“But if that person was executed here, the animosity everyone feels towards me won’t disappear. In that case, even if that person is saved–“

“Lady Celiastina, you do not seem to understand the influence your words have on the common people. Not just you, but that person– people’s views towards Duo will certainly change. You, who has ordered people to be executed without any hesitation up to now, suddenly spares Duo unconditionally then everyone will speculate as to what means Duo used or what kind of relationship he has with the saint.”

“.....”

“To Duo that would be more painful than death. It would be the utmost humiliating thing for him, would it not?”



–She hadn’t thought about that. It’s true that to Duo there might be bad rumors spread. And if that happened, then it would cause him a lot of pain. But was that more important than life and death?..... She didn’t know what she should do.

“In any case, please rest for now. I do not think a conclusion will be reached even if we continue to talk like this. Duo will not be executed today or tomorrow, so please consider the best course of action carefully.”

Asyut straightened his posture again and inclined his head slightly. As he lowered his head, his eyes did not connect with Yuna’s. It might be that Asyut himself had doubts. Yuna swallowed the words that had reached her throat and somehow managed to nod.



After Asyut left the room, Yuna laid down on her wide bed. She felt like all the strength in her body left her. Turning onto her back, she stared hard at her canopy. Fine patterns were gathered together to make one large design. Maybe because she had been staring at it for such a long time, but she started to see an optical illusion of the pattern moving slightly.

Duo’s situation was devastating. It was the first time she had been faced with such intense hatred. Up to now, she had met with people who had been hurt by Celiastina’s follies. But each and every one of them seemed to hold themselves back when coming in contact with her. Was everyone actually holding violent urges just like Duo?

(Why did things come to this point?)

Yuna clenched her hands on the white sheets. She felt like she was undeserving of the sensation of the soft and slippery sheets.

(Celiastina must have regretted a lot of things to end up thinking hard about committing suicide. In that case, was she unable to redo things before they got to this point?)

As she thought this, she was suddenly assaulted by a feeling of nausea. Insuppressible feelings of violent anger and hate attacked Yuna.

It was so intense that, even now, Yuna felt like she was going to be swallowed up.

(In truth, even you don't want Duo to die, right? Celiastina.)

Even as she tried talking, no words were returned. However, there was a "feeling" clearer than words that hit Yuna directly.

"....."

Yuna slowly sat up. She scooped up her long hair with flowed down and spilled across the sheets into one tight bundle. And then she took the bell placed on top of a table and rang it without hesitation.

"Lady Celiastina, you called?"

Nasha immediately appeared. Yuna gave a single nod and, while wrapped a stole around herself, faced Nasha.

"Nasha, I'm sorry but I have a request..... Could you call Aeneas here for me? If possible, without letting anyone else know."

".....I-Is something the matter?"

"I want to head out for a bit. But it'd be bad for me head out alone. And if Sieg is called, I think we'll stand out too much."

"Where will you be heading?"

Nasha asked in a troubled way. Of course, Nasha knew that there was an attempt on Yuna's life. She was sure that the people around her had been warned not to let her go out recklessly. Sorry, Yuna mumbled in her mind.

"I'll definitely come back soon, so... please."

"....."

Nasha kept silent at Yuna's unusual attitude. She must have been wondering, in this short time, what Yuna was thinking and whether she should report this to Asyut or Linus. Nasha stood still but, at the end, gave a nod.

"I understand. Please wait a moment. I will call him immediately."

She bowed before leaving the room. And then, within moments, Aeneas appeared in a soldier's uniform but with an extremely elegant coat. At a glance, he looked like a high-ranking noble.

"Aeneas, what's with those clothes?"

"The vice-captain..... Lord Siecrest, gave me this coat to wear. He said that if I entered into this area wearing a soldier uniform I would draw too much attention..... I apologize, but at that time I was in the middle of a conversation with Lord Siecrest."

Had she been found out by Siecrest? She was sure he knew what she was going to do from here. But she should be able to take the fact that he went out of his way to give Aeneas that coat as his tacit consent.

"Ah, that's right. Sorry."

"Don't be. More importantly, where do you wish to go?"

".....to Duo."

Aeneas lowered his eyes, as if saying he understood.

"Then let us depart immediately. Once it becomes evening, there will be many people coming and going. We should make our way there before that."

"Right! Thank you, Aeneas!"

Yuna had thought that he would strongly oppose her, but instead she was relieved at his response, and walked to Aeneas' side.

†

The prison where Duo was imprisoned was quite a simple construction. Although it was small and dim, it was kept neat and clean unlike the Holy Jail. There were three rooms separated by brick walls. Presently, including all the rooms, there was only Duo who was imprisoned.

Yuna, somehow managing to talk her way past the prison guard, walked down the wide passage. Due to her nervousness, her steps naturally became cautious. There were no other sounds apart from their footsteps. Duo must have heard their footsteps

but she couldn't see any movement from him. Yuna wondered if he was sleeping, but that thought missed the mark.

In the deepest cell, Duo sat with a knee raised, and appeared to be unmoving while hugging that knee.

It looked like he was staring steadily at the prison bars in front of him with blank eyes, but in actuality he wasn't seeing anything. Even when Yuna came up to the bars, he did not make the slightest movement.

".....Duo."

Yuna called out timidly. Duo's shoulders twitched. And then, slowly, he turned his eyes their way. Slowly lifting his head up, he looked at Yuna who was standing past the bars.

Duo was silent.

"Duo, um..."

Yuna didn't know what she should say. She had prepared herself to be yelled at immediately; instead, the way he stared at her silently made her flustered.

"What did you come for?"

At last, Duo opened his mouth. His voice rattled out of dryness. He might have constantly yelled after having been captured. That painful voice made Yuna bite her lip.

"Did you come to sightsee? I defied you and was thrown into jail. Then, after being freed on a whim, I snapped at you again without learning from experience and was thrown back into jail. This idiotic appearance must be a side show for you to pass your time, huh."

"No, that's not it."

"Then what is it. What did you come for?"

"Duo, I have a request."

Yuna kneeled before the prison bars.

"I am going to get you out of here. I'll persuade everyone. I'll definitely get you out of here, so I want you to live Duo."

Duo's expression changed into a harsh one.

"Shut up. Why do you have to request that? Hurry up and leave."

"Please, listen. Please don't give up on the future."

"SHUT UP! I TOLD YOU TO HURRY UP AND LEAVE! At least let me forget about you in my last moments."

"Don't say those words!"

At Yuna's steady shout, Duo swallowed his words. Aeneas, who held back, extended a hand to help Yuna stand but Yuna refused that and pressed on with her words to Duo.

"Duo, please don't think about dying. If you die then everything will end. Your hatred might not disappear in your entire life, but please don't die holding onto that. If you live then you might be able to find happiness again."

"Don't fucking joke around. You're not qualified to say that lip service! The day I learned about Rin's death, anything I saw or heard, everything was grey. EVERYTHING in my world changed!"

"But--"

"In any case, this is the end already! At that point in time where I tried to kill you, it was certain I would get the death penalty. My feelings don't mean anything. Or, what? Is it a new game for you to cut my head off the moment I have hopes about living?"

"Stop!"

Aeneas broke in. He was the one who couldn't endure this situation more than Yuna.

"The fact that you have not been executed and are safe here like this is because Lady Celiastina negotiated with them. Throw away that position, Lady Celiastina was the only one who spoke about setting you free."

"Ha! You were even deliberate enough to prepare a role for someone to flatter you."

An exhausted smile leaked out from Duo.

“You want to make me innocent? That’s such a joke. To acquit a person who directed an intent to kill the saint, but to execute a normal girl who didn’t do anything? Can there be anything more ridiculous? Don’t look down on Rin’s death any more than this.”

“Duo—“

“JUST KILL ME! Execute me, even right now! I was resolved to that from the very start. Even if the saint releases me, I’ll just come to kill you again!”

Duo’s voice, which cracked, resounded through the quiet prison.

The setting sun shone in from the window and illuminated both Duo and Yuna. Another day ended without her being able to do anything.

†

The following morning, Yuna stared down vacantly at the luxurious breakfast lined up before her. She didn’t feel like moving the fork in her hand. When she thought about how probable it was that Duo wasn’t eating much in that prison, she couldn’t seem to raise an appetite. Only being able to tear a small piece of bread and throw it into her mouth, she washed it away with water.

After that, she participated in her ceremonies as usual. And then went to the victims of the Holy Jail. Siegcrest tried to stop her lightly, but she shook him off and went. She didn’t want to neglect other things just because this situation with Duo was happening. Besides, if she just stayed still then her feelings would run rampant.

(I’m really powerless, aren’t I.)

The laundry in the tub of water sank.

(I want Duo to regain his hope for life but I don’t know what I should do at all. He said clearly that he’d prefer to die over getting help from me.)

She understood Duo’s feelings. To receive pity from someone one hated enough to kill was, without a doubt, unbearable.

But, at the same time, another thought swirled inside Yuna. Whenever she remembered Duo's words, a feeling much like irritation arose deep within her heart. -That was a fact she needed to acknowledge.

(These are... my... feelings.)

They weren't the feelings of the "other" that she had experienced many times. This was certainly Yuna's own feelings.

(Why can't everyone understand.)

Why did Asyut hold his duties to be more important than a person's life? Why did Duo rush to his death for the sake of revenge? Why wasn't anyone around her raising their voice to save Duo?

(And why am I running around alone like an idiot?)

Burning selfishly with a sense of duty, she was recklessly agitating the situation. And, in the end, she couldn't do anything. What was she doing, when she hadn't even been asked to do that. It might have been better, for everyone and for Duo, if she had just continued to stay locked up in her room from the start. Just what did she think she could do when she was this powerless.

She didn't have the energy to pull out the sunken laundry. Staring at her hands, exposed in the cold water, she remained unmoving.

Perhaps because she was watching, Nasha, who was beside her, suddenly stopped her hands and looked at Yuna.

"Um, Lady Celiastina."

At that worried and serious voice, Yuna finally raised her head.

"W-What? Is something wrong, Nasha?"

"Ah, um, I..... don't know the details of anything but, um, I support Lady Celiastina so....."

".....Nasha?"

“Uhhmm, ah, I’m sorry. Someone like me can only say these unsatisfactory things. But, Lady Celiastina, please do not be troubled by yourself. This may be presumptuous of me but I want to be of help to you, Lady Celiastina.”

Choosing her words with the utmost care, but still being unable to do it well due to her nervousness, she managed to get that much out despite not knowing what to say here and there.

Yuna, who received those words, froze and her mouth dropped open in amazement. And then, in the next moment, she pressed her lips together and her expression twisted.

“–Nasha! Thank you!!”

“Wah!”

Yuna hugged Nasha with a lot of force. Nasha yelped and flapped her arms. Siecrest, who seemed to be watching the two of them, sighed as if in astonishment.

“You two ladies, what’re you flirting around for with each other. Let me join in.”

“.....Sieg, you pervert.”

“What did you say?!”

Hyah! Siecrest used a hand to throw water in Yuna’s direction.

“What are you doing! I’m going to get wet!”

“Naturally. Since I threw water at you.”

“Sieg, you idiot! Pervert!”

“Huh? The one who calls someone an idiot is the idiot. So following that rule, you’re a pervert above being an idiot. Yo, pervert saint!”

“What’s with that “pervert saint”?! Please stop calling me strange things!”

Undaunted, Yuna used both hands to throw water back. When she did, without a moment’s delay, Siecrest returned fire and soon the place became filled with childish



insults and the sound of water. Nasha, who was the only one with a pale face, tried to stop them but couldn't find an opportunity and could only watch over them nervously.

"Sheesh, we should stop now."

Finally, Yuna ended everything but it was already too late. Because of the water that was scattered everywhere, the two of them were drenched. No, if she included Nasha who had gotten involved, then it'd be more correct to say the three of them were drenched.

She knew that Nasha and Siecrest were worried about her. It was because she entered this place with an expression that looked like the world had ended, and no doubt even the victims who were recuperating here were surprised to see that. While thankful to Nasha and Siecrest for managing to cheer her up, she muttered in a peevish voice.

"This place is a hospital. We'll be a bother if we're too loud."

But Yuna's voice was erased by the laughter of a bright woman.

"Lady Celiastina, I don't mind at all."

It was this infirmary's caretaker, Mislee.

"Rather, having fun like this will be good for everyone's sake as well. It's important for them to think about wanting to play in water like that, or tell jokes and laugh. The most important thing to heal wounds or sickness is one's frame of mind. It's necessary to look forward, even just a little, using any small thing as an excuse. Actually, just a little while ago everyone had been interested in Lady Celiastina and the others."

Being told that, Yuna moved her gaze to the inside of the room but everyone had their sheets covering them up to their heads, as usual, and she couldn't see anything.

"Right now, everyone has become quite energetic. And that's why they are showing an interest in things outside their beds. It is thanks to you, Lady Celiastina, for coming here every day."

No, Yuna bit her lip. Everyone regained their health thanks to none other than Mislee. Their hearts were healed by her serene personality and kindness. Mislee was a strange woman. She wasn't eye-catching but she made everyone feel a kindness wrap

around them, deep in their chest. Eve now, she treated Yuna to smiles that held no ill feelings. That was a serious thing.

“I know you must be busy with various things, but even coming here like this for a short amount of time pleases everyone.”

At Mislee’s calm words, Yuna smiled.

I see.

(I’m... not alone.)

She realized that once again.

Hadn’t she been thinking that she had to somehow do everything herself? Hadn’t she been set on thinking that she bore everything on her shoulders, such as being able to open Duo’s heart and release him?

(That isn’t the case.)

There were a lot of things that she couldn’t do by herself. For example, this mountain of laundry would have been too much for her to wash without Nasha’s help. It is only with the concern of Mislee, who stood in front of her, that they were able to bring these peaceful days to the victims.

Nasha’s words about being of help to her gradually spread through Yuna’s heart.

When Yuna had still been a village girl, it was natural for her to spend every day supporting each other like this. For her to forget such a thing...

(The same goes for Duo’s situation. If I can’t do anything alone, then maybe a path will open with the help of others.)

Thinking that, she was able to release a little tension from her shoulders. It wouldn’t be a simple road. But it wasn’t a road that she couldn’t pursue–.

“So, you’ve come to me?”

Linus was seated deeply in his chair, and combed back his bangs lazily. There were heaps of documents in front of him on the desk; it looked like he wasn’t actually a person with that much free time.

Yuna, after finishing her help at the infirmary, intruded on Linus’ office in the afternoon. She regretted interrupting his work, but it wasn’t like she had much time either. She couldn’t leave Duo to be imprisoned in that jail for several days.

“You know, I’ve said that I was your guardian, but that doesn’t mean I’m your exclusive jack of all trades.”

“I know, but I don’t know what I should be doing alone. Do you have any good ideas? Linus, can’t you think of a way to save Duo?”

“I can’t think of any.”

An immediate answer. It was like he didn’t think about it at all, and she grew irritated.

“Please, think on it some more. A person’s life is concerned, you know?”

“Sorry, but I have a lot of other things that I need to think about.”

The hand that was making his pen run stopped. And when Linus raised his face, his eyes were unusually cold.

“Are there that many things which are more important than a person’s life? Why is everyone—”

“There are many. You don’t understand. Asyut and Ser Siegcrest gave you a kind and thorough explanation, no? About why the young man called Duo cannot be saved. That is all there is to it. And anyone else you depend on will say the same.”

“I don’t want him to die, I just want him to live. Is thinking that such a wrong thing?”

“I won’t say that you are wrong. However, things do not move simply in this world just from that. I am certain there are many others who do not wish for Duo to die. There

must be people who care for him, not just his dead wife. But the fact that those people have kept silent means they understand that there is nothing they can do with arguments just based on emotion–“

“I don’t understand.”

Yuna interrupted Linus.

“Honestly, you. What I don’t understand, more than anything else, is nothing other than you.”

Linus slowly stood and walked to Yuna’s side. Yuna, who had to look up at Linus, felt her breath catch at this sense of intimidation.

“Why are you able to care so much for a complete stranger? Clearly, you have absolutely nothing to do with Duo’s matter. You didn’t imprison him, and you didn’t kill his wife. There should be no need for you to feel responsible. And yet, you’re working so hard to beg for his life. –Listen, Celia, what I have to think about is you.”

Linus stretched out a finger to touch Yuna’s cheek softly.

“Exactly what are you? You said this and that about God declaring that Celiastina’s soul was exhausted, but am I supposed seriously believe that? I have been entrusted to be the saint’s guardian. There is no way I can accept this situation without having any doubts. Your true identity, the cause of the incident, and future interactions– there are many things that need to be clarified.”

“Why, are you talking like that..... I, haven’t spoken a lie.”

“Really? I cannot believe that. You said that Celiastina will return soon. But is that truly the case? When I watch your actions, it does not make me think that you intend to return this body to Celiastina. Resigning yourself to being scolded for things you haven’t done, atoning for sins you haven’t committed, behaving in ways to make yourself appear even the slightest bit more lovable to the people around you, and, finally, running around frantically to save a man who committed treason.”

Linus placed a slight amount of strength into his finger.

“Yes–, no matter what it seems like, I can only think that you are taking over Celiastina’s body, no, her life.”

She felt like her chest was struck.

At once she was awash with tears and Linus' shape distorted. The sound of her heart resounded loudly in her ears.

"I..... I'm not doing that."

Somehow, she managed to muster her voice.

"I'm not being the saint because I want to. I didn't want to be Celiastina's replacement. Of course I wondered why it was me! But I didn't want to be trapped just in those thoughts. And so, just for a little bit, I told myself repeatedly to work hard. That's the case with Duo. No one is working to save Duo. Even the person himself doesn't want to be saved. When I asked why, I was spurned and told that I didn't have the right to speak of those things. I'm done!! I feel like I'm being crushed!! I want to throw away absolutely everything. But I won't give up..... because I don't want to lose the things I've believed in up to now."

"....."

Linus, with the finger that was against Yuna's cheek, gently wiped away her tears.

"I am Saint Celiastina's guardian. I have to always be thinking about her and this country. Even if I feel that your cries and tears are real, I cannot accept that compliantly. Sorry."

Linus' hand was warm. Even though her feelings were thrust away coldly, why was his right hand on her cheek so warm?

That made Yuna all the more sorrowful.

†

A balcony where the setting sun was dazzling. This place where one could see the setting sun directly was said to be one of the best scenic spots in this large royal palace. In order to participate in the ceremony of showing herself to the general populace, Yuna had to walk out onto that balcony.

She walked through the polished hall while staring at nothing but her own reflected

image. In the end, Yuna was unable to gain Linus' cooperation and, instead, she was stabbed in her most painful place. She felt like the enthusiasm that Nasha and the others had brought to her was all washed away. But even so, her participation in this ceremony was partly something like obstinacy. If she chose to run away once then she felt like she really wouldn't be able to return.

Yuna quietly went down to stand on the balcony, where the people were waiting.

In that moment, she raised her head to loud shouts of joy that pierced her ears.

The mysterious light that dyed this entire side red was very beautiful. But, before her eyes could be stolen by that sight, she was overwhelmed by the amount of people surrounding the balcony. The plaza that was thrown open to the general populace was literally closely packed and jammed with people. No, maybe she should say the people willingly packed themselves in. It was like a sea of people and Yuna looked at them in astonishment. Everyone had excited smiles and were waving their hands eagerly in her direction.

She had attended several of these ceremonies to show herself to the people but, compared to the first time she appeared on this balcony, it felt like the amount of people gathered here had increased. She was sure that the previous times hadn't been this crowded. Was it because they wanted to catch a glimpse of Celiastina who, unlike before, was appearing at these ceremonies without missing a single one?

(No one here knows, huh, the person that Celiastina is.)

The beautiful saint. The maiden beloved by God. What they knew was nothing more than the "model" of Celiastina. And that was how they could offer worship to her, right? But her career and beauty were different from the real her. The real Celiastina was cold-hearted and cruel. No, even that might not be the "real" her. Yes, no one actually knew... the kind of person she was.....

(Why did Celiastina become the "Cruel Saint"?)

Unintentionally, a perplexed expression appeared on her face. Even though she was in the middle of the Ceremony of Display, what occupied her heart was a person who had gone to a place far away. Who was Celiastina? And, who was Yuna—.

Yuna came back to herself with a start. No, she was in the middle of a ceremony right now. She was in front of many people who had rushed here to catch a glimpse of

Celiastina's gorgeous appearance. If she looked down on everyone with an uneasy face then no doubt they would become uneasy as well.

(But, is that true? Once they leave this plaza, anything about the saint will surely fade completely from their minds. Because the saint was a person unrelated to their lives. That's how it was for me. There were many days where Celiastina's name didn't even come to mind. And, nothing troubling happened even once.....)

Yuna stared at the people with a crease between her brows. Everyone's carefree smiles were now painful. The person here wasn't the real Celiastina. She was a fake. She didn't have any special powers, and she couldn't save anyone. She was just a small human being.

When she dropped her gaze again, Yuna noticed something.

While being brushed up against by all the people, and while being a member of that themselves, there was an old woman who looked up eagerly. –Her face was streaming with tears but she had absolutely no scruples about looking at Yuna wholeheartedly. She had both hands clasped firmly above her chest, as if she was kneeling down in front of God.

(Ah.....)

Suddenly, she remembered.

(Asyut talked about that... about there being people who spent their days supporting them. I see, they exist. They really do exist.)

Accepting that old woman's direct gaze, Yuna didn't avert her eyes.

Asyut's desire was to answer this woman's gaze. He chose to accept a path where the hearts of people found hope from him and believed in him. That he continued to be the First Holy Knight meant that. It was the same as suppressing his own emotions and executing Duo. If he listened to his heart and easily pardoned Duo, he would be abandoning his role as the First Holy Knight– in other words, if he saved Duo it might mean that he would be betraying others.

(What Linus was saying too, might have been this.)

Yuna realized that it was as though she didn't comprehend the importance of the

“saint” that she bore.

(It’s true that I might have just been saying selfish things. Without doing anything myself, or thinking about the position of others, I just shouted about saving Duo blindly. Thinking that I was right, I blamed others for not working to save him.)

However, it was surely not a matter of who was correct or mistaken. Asyut and Linus had their own paths that they “believe” in. And, undoubtedly, they couldn’t change their course easily. Without even understanding that, she just forced her thoughts onto others and asked for help.

(The story of the poisonous bug..... how did it go? About the boy who changed into a poisonous bug.)

The black bug that was crushed in cold blood passed by her mind.

(Only looking for help and not being able to do anything by himself– yes, didn’t he die?)

Doing one’s best with help and demanding help without doing anything seemed similar, but they were completely different.

(I..... didn’t understand a lot of things.)

Once again, Yuna looked over the gathered people. And then, for a long time like that, she did not move.



# Chapter Eight

It was an unexpected person who moved in this stalemate.

“Lady Celiastina, it looks like Lady Yodel is making a move to save Duo!”

One afternoon, after several days had passed, Nasha, who came to prepare tea, reported this to Yuna excitedly. Nasha knew about the situation with Duo. Rather, this matter spread throughout the royal palace in the blink of an eye, to the point where there was likely no one who didn't know about it already. Many sympathized with Duo's position, but the fact that he pointed a blade at the saint meant that the majority's view was that there was no choice but to execute him. And so, why Duo hadn't been executed yet was making everyone suspicious.

It was most likely that not many knew about how the saint was thinking about ways to free him somehow. But, due to Nasha having spent a long time with Yuna, she could sense those feelings. It seemed like she was hoping this information she brought would be able to cheer up Yuna, who had been depressed lately.

“By Yodel, do you mean that priestess?”

“Yes! The lady who gave me the pendant I talked about before.”

Yuna was genuinely surprised. Ever since she had been severely rebuked that one time, she hadn't seen Yodel again but it looked like she had been making her own moves. –And it was to save Duo.

“I hear that she is gathering signatures from those who want Duo to be released. The subject of the movement being what it is seems to make it so they can't act too publicly, but it seems like she is centered on requesting signatures slowly from the servants and even the nobility.”

“I... see.”

For the first time in a while, her feelings were uplifted. She had thought Yodel was a cold and strict person, but she was actually a person who could extend a hand voluntarily to a powerless person standing in a dilemma. A petition to save Duo–.

“Wow! Yodel is amazing!”

“She is, isn’t she. She is a really wonderful lady!”

Yuna and Nasha held each other’s hands, overjoyed. Ah, so there was that kind of method. There must be many people who want to save Duo. It’s just that, even if they thought that, it was difficult for them to raise their voice. In that case, if someone took the initiative and gathered their voices... If one person’s voice wouldn’t reach, then wouldn’t a group of them become a large force? Yodel understood that.

“I wonder how many signatures she’s collected.”

“Most likely there’s not many..... it appears to be a small movement still. Even if they have the support of Lady Yodel, there are still many people who are resistant to writing their own names down.”

That would be certain. –Nasha didn’t state it but, in other words, if people signed they would be getting in the way of Lady Celiastina. No one knew that the saint wanted to release Duo. Rather, in light of her actions up to now, they think she’s going to go ahead and execute him. And so joining this petition would mean going against the will of the saint.

(But it’s best if I don’t declare that I want to release Duo. If I do, then in the end Duo might be saved because of my influence.)

Nonetheless, she couldn’t just stand still here like this. She finally saw the light. A light that could save Duo.

“I want to help out secretly too.”

“Eh?”

“I want to help collect signatures. When I went to the west side of the royal palace before, the people there didn’t seem to recognize my face. I might be able to collect signatures over there without being found out as the saint.”

“B-But Lady Celiastina.”

Nasha became flustered at the unexpected direction this talk went on.

“I’ll even ask Aeneas to accompany me. Oh, that’s right! I wonder if the people at the infirmary have given their signatures already? If not, then maybe I should ask them. I’m sure the people at the infirmary will want to save Duo, right?”

“U-Um..... are you really going to do this?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll do it very quietly..... it’ll be a secret from Yodel too. I’m sure it’s best if no one knows that I’m getting involved in this movement. Yes, now that I’ve decided I should hurry and go. There’s another ceremony in the evening so I’ll return before then.”

Yuna quickly prepared and called Aeneas to her room without time for Nasha to stop her. Aeneas, who had just arrived, appeared hesitant to refuse Yuna when he saw her liveliness. Still, Yuna had to smile wryly at how worried the two looked.

“Sorry, I’m always just doing what I want. But I feel like I’ve finally found what I should be doing. –Thanks to Yodel.”

†

The western side of the royal palace was as lively as always, just like the time she went there before. As she thought, no one here seemed to recognize her face and most of the people passed by. Sometimes, soldiers would call out to Aeneas and poke fun at his relationship with Yuna, but never would they have dreamed that she was *that* saint.

“Lady Celiastina, I apologize for my comrades making you feel uncomfortable.”

“I don’t mind at all. Rather, I’m the one who should be sorry.”

“No, I–“

“Oh, Aeneas! Are you on a date?”

It was other soldiers who called out to the two of them from behind. It looked like three of them were carrying a large bundle for some reason. They all laughed when Aeneas rebuked them, calling them idiots. When Yuna also turned around, the faces of the three soldiers froze instantly.

(Ah, could it be that they recognize me?)

“.....Aeneas, w-who is this amazing beauty?”

Yuna turned red when she realized they meant her. That’s right, Celiastina was an outrageous beauty. Normally, she didn’t have the time to keep that in mind and so she had forgotten, but she herself had become speechless the first time she saw Celiastina’s appearance.

But, why not use it since she had it? Yuna, while feeling nervous, tried smiling sweetly at the three soldiers.

“Um, actually, right now we’re going around to request something from everyone.”

What is it, they asked and immediately took the bait.

“Do you know about the person called Duo who was imprisoned for defying Lady Celiastina?”

“Aa, yes we do.”

“Knowing Duo’s personal history, don’t you think it’s unbearable for him to be executed like this under treason? And so, we’re going around asking for signatures from everyone in order to free Duo.”

“Signatures to free him?”

The soldiers looked at each other with embarrassed expressions.

“No, well, I do sympathize but...”

“Ah, but a signature is.....”

“Please, lend your strength. Lady Yodel is the one who started this movement. I’m sure Lady Yodel will deliver everyone’s voice to the proper place.”

When she looked at them with a desperate expression that was not an act, their faces turned red as they exchanged looks with each other again.

“.....Aeneas, did you sign?”

“Aa, of course.”

At Aeneas’ firm nod, they also seemed to have hardened their resolve. They took the pen and signed, one by one.

“Thank you so much!”

Yuna cried out in a lively voice and gripped the hands of the soldiers. Other people, who had been watching them at a distance, came closer with great interest. Most of them were men but gradually a large circle was formed without a difference in men and women.

Yodel’s name showed an extraordinary effect. There was quite a lot of people who signed when they heard Yodel’s name. Yuna couldn’t help but feel how much Yodel was trusted by everyone. In the middle of collecting signatures, she frequently heard angry voices directed at the saint but there was not one person who said something bad about Yodel. There were even people who declared that Yodel was more suitable as a saint. Yuna was ashamed to hear that but, in any case, she was concentrating on collecting signatures right now.

“You are all quite enthusiastic. There are people who are collecting signatures like this closer to the center, but everyone here is putting in their utmost effort.”

A good-natured woman said and smiled serenely. Yuna, when she heard that, panicked inside. It would be bad for her to bump heads with the real people under Yodel. It wasn’t like she was doing anything wrong, but Yuna wanted to avoid having her true identity revealed.

“Aeneas, how about we finish for today?”

It looked like Aeneas had no objections to that either.

“Can we drop by the infirmary on the way back? I want to collect signatures there too.”

“Of course. Then, let us return.”

As they returned to the center of the royal palace, Yuna and Aeneas both quickly put on the thin cloaks they each had. They wore plain clothes so as to not stand out in the western side, but on the other hand they would stand out terribly like that in the center. By putting on a well-tailored cloak, they were hoping they could dodge any

looks.

“Ah, Mislee.”

When they arrived at the infirmary, they saw Mislee sweeping at the entrance.

“Oh, Lady Celiastina. Your bodyguard is someone else today, I see.”

Mislee raised her face and smiled with her whole face. Aeneas also bowed lightly and exchanged greetings.

“Now then, please do come in.”

“No, this is fine. Actually, Mislee, I have a small request.....”

“Ah, yes, the signatures. I heard from Nasha and right now she is in the middle of going around to everyone.”

“Nasha..... um, then is everyone willing to sign?”

Mislee gave a large nod.

“Everything is well. I am sure the people here are those who wish to save Duo more than anyone else, no? Of course, I also signed. If you wish, you could take a look inside.”

“If I go in then everyone will shrink away and the signatures would be forgotten. I think I’ll leave it to Nasha since she’s doing her best.”

“Is that so?”

Mislee made a slight noise of disappointment, but she didn’t press.

“In that case, please do come by again to show your face. We will be waiting for you.”

“Yes, thank you very much!”

And then Yuna and Aeneas returned to her room. Yuna breathed a sigh of relief at being able to return without being seen by Asyut or Linus. Aeneas, who also seemed to have a relieved look, gave a bow to Yuna.

“Then, I will take my leave, Lady Celiastina. If there is anything else you need, please call on me at anytime.”

“Okay, thank you so much. I might rely on you again for tomorrow, so I look forward to being in your care at that time.”

Aeneas smiled gently and then left. After she saw him off, Yuna leaned her back against the wall near the entrance to her room and dropped her eyes to the signatures in her hand..... She was able to collect more signatures than she thought. More than anything, she was happy that everyone wanted to save Duo just like her. If there was some sort of opportunity, then everyone would move like this.

(Even Duo would be a little cheered to see this, right?)

There were a lot of people who were thinking about him. That was all she wanted him to know. He might have felt that he was all alone in a world where his wife was gone, but that wasn't true.

–You aren't alone. Yuna appealed strongly to Duo, who had been holding his knees in the jail.

†

Turning on the lamp at hand, Linus leaned back against the large back of his chair. He realized again that he had spent quite a long time facing documents. His current job was to create a report on the abnormal event that occurred to Saint Celiastina. It was necessary for him to compile plans on how to deal with the current events and the future hereafter.

(Good gracious, she is someone who does strange things one after another.)

Not long ago there had been a report from a maid. Celiastina took Aeneas along with her and went to the western side. Even though she had been attacked by an unknown man just the other day, did she not think about the dangers of going out to a place like that?

The contents of any of the reports that he was submitting periodically to those at the top was becoming astounding. It was like that when that Celiastina liberated the Holy Jail, and it was like that when she went to take care of the victims at the infirmary. This

time it was wanting to help a young man who tried to kill her. As he wrote that, Linus wanted to laugh at this joke.

How did Celiastina achieve a complete change like this? He had reported to the top that maybe it was a case of her personality splitting. He had never seen an actual example of that, but he had heard stories. But even if they asked if that was really the case, they had no evidence. The truth was known only to those “two” Celiastina.

“Lord Linus, may I enter?”

At that moment, there was the muffled voice of a woman from the other side of his door.

“Come in.”

“Excuse me.”

The person who came in was the priestess, Yodel. The face that stuck out from the plain robe that covered her body was beautiful, but as expressionless as usual.

“May I have some of your time?”

“I don’t mind. I wish to speak with you as well.”

Yodel narrowed her eyes cautiously at his answer.

“Please, sit.”

“No, thank you. This is fine.”

Yodel walked up to Linus and looked down at him with her usual indifferent eyes.

“I want to ask about the recent Lady Celiastina.”

“About Celia?”

“Clearly Lady Celiastina has been acting strangely recently. I have had the opportunity to speak to her many times but, compared to before, she is almost like a different person. And someone like you must be aware of that.”



“.....Have you not looked over the reports I submitted up to now?”

“I do not have permission to view those.”

Hm, Linus’ mouth relaxed.

“I see. Well, that may be a wise decision. You’ve been prone to treating Celia like an enemy, so those people at the top must have thought it would be best not to give you imprudent information.”

“Then, as I thought, something happened to Lady Celiastina, right?”

Linus kept silent as he showed Yodel the report in front of him. Yodel hesitated slightly before she took it. She read in silence for a while but her expression gradually became stern.

“Split personality from memory loss? What is this. In other words, having lost her memories up to now, a new and separate personality has been born in Lady Celiastina?”

“It’s simply a hypothesis.”

“Why all of a sudden? There haven’t been any signs of that up to now, right?”

“I don’t know if this is sudden or not. She could have always been holding something like pain inside of herself.”

“You’re saying she could not endure that suffering and created another personality?..... The current Lady Celiastina seems to be in quite a charming state. Is she trying to act like everything up to now didn’t happen and is trying again to be a good saint beloved by everyone?”

Yodel spat that out hatefully. It was clear that she would not accept such a thing.

“Lord Linus, you aren’t possibly intending to accept that, right? The animosity towards Lady Celiastina is reaching its limits within the royal palace. Soon the time will come when the saint’s way of doing things will be corrected. It is taking too much for granted to think about wanting to redo things at this point in time.”

“Reaching its limits, huh. –But I think that current seems to be calming down little by

little from Celia's recent actions."

"Everyone is simply being abused by her whims. What is there to say about her liberating the Holy Jail? In the first place it was Lady Celiastina herself who created an abominable place such as the Holy Jail. I would appreciate it if she did not suddenly take actions that make no sense and confuse everyone."

"In other words, you're saying that it was more convenient for you if she didn't do something like liberate the Holy Jail, no?"

Linus smiled with amusement and rested his chin in his hands in a relaxed manner. Yodel remained expressionless and looked down on Linus in silence.

"You would have preferred – and even been thankful – if Celia remained as she was and continued with her misdeeds, correct? Just a little bit more and even a large rebellion towards the saint could have occurred. But because she suddenly liberated the Holy Jail, it was as if she dodged you. I even heard that immediately following the liberation of the Holy Jail you marched to where Celia was and pressed her about why she did that. For someone as composed as you to take that action... you must not have been able to stomach it, no?"

"....."

"Now, it looks like everything is connected. So, this time, let me ask you some questions."

Linus sat up and crossed his arms. Despite being looked down on by Yodel, he had an atmosphere as if he wasn't in that position.

"You were the one who incited Duo, were you not, Lady Yodel?"

Yodel did not open her mouth. Only the sharp light in her eyes was reflected in the lamplight.

"After the liberation of the Holy Jail, the intense murderous intent that young man held towards Celia was judged to be a problem. Starting with Asyut, everyone checked him and paid discrete attention so that harm would not reach Celia. And yet, in the end, Duo slipped through that strict encirclement was able to draw near to Celia. That is impossible for the likes of a person who is at most a servant. Which means that there was guidance from someone else. And that person would also have to be someone

with comparable authority and influence as us.”

“.....”

“It must be a shame not to be able to bury Celia.”

“It appears that you are misunderstanding something.”

Yodel answered without any discomposure. Linus raised an eyebrow and closed his mouth.

“From the start I have not wanted Lady Celiastina’s death..... I just wanted her to relinquish her influence.”

It was a clear voice. Though quiet, it resounded through the room well.

“The Holy Mark on her neck has not disappeared. Meaning that it is not her time to die yet. If that was forced, I do not know what kind of catastrophes would befall this country. We need Lady Celiastina to live. However, all she needs to do is be alive. She just needs to breathe and sit there.”

“Do you mean becoming a lifelike doll?”

“From the beginning I did not think that Duo could kill Lady Celiastina. I have not underestimated Lord Asyut and the others. However, I wanted the fact that Duo aimed a blade at Lady Celiastina. Of course he would be imprisoned. And then executed.”

“And then you would manipulate the emotions within the royal palace in view of that.”

Yodel showed her first smile.

“Manipulation, you say. It is simply a natural flow, is it not? He was imprisoned on a trivial event and his wife was killed. This young man in despair assaulted the saint to fulfill his revenge. However, that was not granted, he was caught, and then executed. – It is quite a tragedy with no salvation. And it is not difficult to imagine how everyone would feel to accept that. All I did was give Duo’s back a light push.”

“What a pleasingly clean decision. Do you not feel any guilt for using Duo as a sacrificial pawn?”

“We cannot weigh one person’s life to the security of this country. If everyone can smile and live happily then that is certainly a wonderful thing. However, those who are at the top cannot just pursue ideals. At times they need to have the resolution to bear sacrifices.”

“Well, you have a point. –Is what I think but what about you, Asyut?”

Haa, Yodel closed her mouth. There was a small crack that can be seen from the door to the room. It opened slowly. And there, with a grim look, stood Asyut. For the first time in this conversation, Yodel’s expression showed displeasure.

“Today seems to be a flood of customers. Don’t stand there and come in.”

Asyut stepped into the room at that invitation. Linus could see the other’s irritation from his direct steps, which lacked any hesitation.

“Lord Asyut. Eavesdropping is a disgrace to knights.”

“I do not believe now is the time to talk about such things.”

Asyut rejected her words in a quiet voice.

“Lady Yodel, in order to undermine the saint’s authority, you spurred on Duo, am I correct?”

“.....Correct.”

Yodel did not surrender. By nature she was a woman with nerves of steel.

“Lady Celiastina cannot continue to be given power like this, and even you understand that, right? If we leave her unregulated then those who are hurt will continuously increase. In order to protect this country, we need to act now. Even if it involves some pain right now, these are small things when looked at in the long run.”

“.....Are you honestly saying that?”

“Am I mistaken somewhere? I believe my way of thinking is the same as yours, Lord Asyut. After all, you have no objections to executing Duo, am I wrong?”

“You are not. In my position as the First Holy Knight, the only thoughts to have are

about his execution. Not just me, but everyone who is in a position to govern this country thinks so. The only one who doesn't think so by now is Lady Celiastina."

"And? Have you also been moved by her?"

".....I wanted Lady Yodel to accept that role."

Yodel's eyes widened, as if she had been struck in an unguarded moment, and lost her words.

"Everyone in the royal palace trusts you, Lady Yodel. There are many who regard you as sacred in comparison to the cruel Lady Celiastina. Only Lady Yodel is not confined by the ties of obligation and authority and will stretch her hand out to those who suffer in front of her- as far as you're concerned though, that may simply be an illusion people hold of their own accord."

"....."

"Lady Yodel, you started a petition in order to save Duo. Rumors are starting to spread slowly about it. If you intended to dispose of Duo from the beginning, why did you start such a movement?"

"....."

"I believe it is a hard question for Lady Yodel to answer, as it will crush your trust in her even more."

Linus broke in.

"I will explain it on her behalf. First, Lady Yodel knows that she has a "role" like you have said, Asyut. By showing herself acting for Duo's sake she will hold a saintly image and, in reaction to that, everyone's animosity to Celia will amplify. If there is a mansion beside a dilapidated house, then wouldn't that dilapidated house's shabbiness stand out even more? It's that kind of thing. Second, I believe that by letting servants and even nobles participate with their signatures the aim is to make them feel as if they are personally involved with the problem this time. I do not think anyone can be indifferent to the life of a young man they signed about "wanting to help" being taken. This is also effective in inflating the animosity towards Celia."

If there is a part you want to correct, please go ahead, Linus seemed to imply as he

paused unconcernedly. Yodel remained silent.

“In any case, it will not work out just having signatures. It would be another story if signatures of prestigious nobles were to lined up one after another, but it does not seem like the movement right now has spread to those high-ranking people. At this rate, it will not have enough power to overturn Duo’s execution in the end. This is also within Lady Yodel’s calculations though, I believe.”

Asyut sent an austere look to Yodel. Yodel, as if to throw off that gaze, shook her head furiously.

“–I am always acting with thoughts of the country in mind. I do not care how you perceive me. I do not believe that I am doing anything wrong!”

Then she turned, flipping the hem of her robe, and left the room at a quick pace. Asyut, who was left behind, pressed his lips together tightly and stared after her back. On the other hand, Linus shrugged his shoulders in exasperation.

“I also don’t particularly think she is mistaken though. But with a look like she was running away, I wonder if the person herself, in honesty, thinks that she is wrong somewhere. Though you might call that being unthorough, or being weak.”

“.....I also cannot completely repudiate Lady Yodel’s course of actions. However...”

“You can’t help but think about aiding Celia, who is trying to save Duo regardless of appearance?”

Linus smiled wryly.

“You came here because you wanted to consult me about what to do with Duo from here, right? –In conclusion, I do not intend to act. Celia also came to beg me in tears but I thrust her away coldly. It looked like she was stricken quite hard in being unable to attain anyone’s help. However, if Celia, without feeling discouraged, came to say that she wanted to save him no matter what then– at that time, I think I would agree to help out.”

Asyut kept silent when he received those words. It seemed that complicated emotions that even he himself couldn’t grasp were squirming around inside him. Should he move to help Celiastina? Or...

(It's best to think it over carefully. As the relationship between you and Celia from now on will change greatly upon this decision.)

Linus added that without putting it in words.

# Chapter Nine

Looking up at the high blue sky, Yuna breathed out.

For some time she had been raising her voice and, as one would expect, she wasn't able to hide her fatigue now.

"Shall we take a short rest, Lady Celiastina?"

Beside her Aeneas looked at Yuna's state with concern.

Yuna and the others had been running about the next day, and thereafter, collecting signatures. Right now, they had even stretched out to the vicinity of the entrance to the gates of the royal palace and soliciting help from the people who passed by in order to release Duo. Signatures were being collected smoothly and in these few days they had actually exceeded 100 names from twenty percent of the people going in and out of the royal palace.

"I'm okay, let's continue on a bit more. We'll have to return soon anyway."

"Once we return, you will be attending a ceremony immediately, right? If you don't rest, your body will be impaired."

"Aeneas, you're making use of your spare time between training to accompany me, aren't you? You're the same in that once this is over you'll be heading to work, right? Others too. Everyone is in the same circumstances."

But, Aeneas murmured unclearly with a greatly distressed face.

"You're taking too much upon yourself, you know."

Yuna turned around, surprised at the sudden voice, only to have her vision covered by a spread of white paper. Next, both her hands were filled by the weight of the pamphlets.

"Wah!"



It was such an unexpected event that Yuna almost accidentally dropped the mountain of pamphlets. Somehow, she managed not to and raised her head to see Siecrest, who she hadn't seen in a while, in front of her.

"Sieg!"

"Use those."

She dropped her eyes to the pamphlets in her arms again upon being told that. –It was a lot of signatures.

"T-This..."

"I thought I should help you in the end. Well, I only asked around a little bit and it became like this. Those are the signatures from all the holy knights."

"A-All of the holy knights....."

Yuna and Aeneas stared at Siecrest in blank amazement.

"Of course my signature is in there too..... Honestly, I wasn't intending to help but then I thought that, since you've come this far, it wouldn't be so bad to help save Duo. But the captain was really angry and that was a problem. He told me not to forcibly drag the holy knights into this with my actions as the vice-captain."

She could understand that. The vice-captain of the Order of Holy Knights would have great influence.

"But, in the end, that captain signed as well. He's mostly a good guy."

A smile slipped out from Siecrest.

"Sieg, it looks like you knew that we were collecting signatures."

"It's become quite the rumor, you know. An unidentified super beauty is running around to save the life of a misfortunate young man."

"Eh?!"

"You should use that rumor. You need to slowly involve more people. The top won't be

moved by this yet.”

“.....Y-You’re right.”

“Sorry, but while us holy knights have a large presence during times of war, during times of peace like this our position is weak. Even with all of our signatures, you’re still lacking a decisive blow. If you’re thinking of moving the people at the top then it’s necessary for you to be backed by someone who has influence and doesn’t lean towards the military.”

Once again, she realized what he said again was certainly true. She had acted thinking that Duo could be saved with everyone’s will being gathered, but maybe that was naive.

“.....For example...”

“If the king says yes then it’s your victory, Celia. But the king won’t nod unless his close aides all agree. And, looking at the aides beside the king that you can reach– it would probably be Asyut or Lord Linus. If you can win them over, then I think those two will be able to do something about the others.”

It looked like it wasn’t possible to avoid them, huh. Yuna bit her lip. She didn’t want to face those two at all. Even if she asked them now, wouldn’t the result be the same?

(But this time I’m not alone. There are a lot of people with me with this.)

Yuna strongly hugged the list in her arms. In order to respond to the people who signed, she wasn’t ever going to give up until Duo was saved. First, she would go and see Asyut. Last time they talked he had told her to “take some time to reconsider”. Now, many days after that, and on top of understanding the “position” she and he have– her thoughts on wanting to save Duo haven’t changed. She was going to tell Asyut that. And then somehow she would get him to understand.

But what should she do about Linus. Beyond Duo’s problem, she and Linus were at cross purposes over a fundamental part. Right now, she was terrified at having to face Linus who had completely denied her existence. However, at any rate, she needed to give her undivided attention to saving Duo. She wasn’t in the position to run away from Linus.

There was another problem too. Duo himself. He had completely lost his will to live.

Even if everything went well and Duo was released, at this rate it wouldn't have been done for his sake. She needed to get him to be positive somehow.

The only relief was from Yodel. She was secretly moving in order to save Duo. Yuna had heard that Yodel was a person with influence comparable to Asyut and Linus. Should she meet and talk to Yodel directly? The other person might hate having to join hands with her, but they had the same mind about wanting to help Duo. Maybe it was possible for them to properly talk.

(There are still a lot of things that need to be done. What do I do? Where should I start?)

"Lady Celiastina, I really think you do not look well."

As Aeneas called out to her worriedly, he scooped up the list from Yuna's hands. Siegcrest too had an unusual concerned voice.

"Hey, you should rest a bit before the next ceremony."

"O-Okay....."

Yuna nodded ambiguously. It's true that her head hurt from thinking too much. Unawares, Yuna grabbed onto Aeneas' arm.

"Lady Celiastina?"

"Sorry. But, can we rest here..... just for a little bit?"

Without waiting for an answer, Yuna staggered on unsteady feet to a nearby overhang. And then she crouched down while being supported by Aeneas.

"I'm sorry. We can go just after a little bit though."

Yuna slowly closed her eyes. Various information ran around through her head. All of them seemed to run away from Yuna's hands when she tried to catch them. It was as if it was hopeless to line them up in order. They banged around violently in Yuna's head and, just for a moment, she tried to clear everything away and make it pure white.

Yes, just for a moment.

Once she calmed down, she would think about this again.

–Ah, it’s finally quiet. I can feel a bit calmer with this–.

†

Ha, Yuna suddenly opened her eyes.

As soon as the handkerchief that was placed on her forehead shook slightly, it was drawn away. Her eyes followed the direction of the handkerchief without thinking– and then she noticed Asyut standing immediately beside her.

“A-Asyu–.....”

“Have you come to?”

She looked around, still dazed, and what entered her vision was a familiar ceiling, a familiar bed, a familiar table and familiar drawer– she noticed that this was unmistakably her own room. The only thing that was unfamiliar in this room was Asyut, who was standing beside her and examining her state.

“I... fell asleep.....”

“You are mistaken. You lost consciousness.”

Yuna was surprised to be told that. But, certainly, her situation probably couldn’t be called “falling asleep”. She caused trouble for everyone again–.

“How long was I unconscious for?”

“It was not very long. The sun has not set yet.”

When she looked out the window, she could see that it was indeed somewhat sunny.

“Why are you here, Asyut?”

“Siegcrest called me. I told Siegcrest and Aeneas to return to their respective positions, but rest assured I will immediately tell them that you have awoken.”

Yuna nodded. And then she passed her gaze around her surroundings, only to realize

that she couldn't find the list that was more precious than anything else. Asyut, who saw her flustered state, seemed to know instantly what Yuna was looking for.

"If you are looking for the signatures then they are over here."

He took the list that was placed on the table beside Yuna, and handed them over to her. Yuna breathed a sigh of relief when she held them.

"You have collected quite a lot."

"Ah, y-yes."

Come to think of it, she hadn't told Asyut yet that she joined the petition. She looked at him timidly, thinking that he would be angry upon learning that, but it didn't seem like that. Rather, he seemed even calmer than usual. Like how Siecrest immediately knew that she was acting, perhaps her actions reached Asyut's ears a long time ago.

"Do you intend to continue with this movement?"

"Yes."

Even if he told her that she was bound to fail due to inadequate help, she didn't intend to stop. These signatures were something of a support for Yuna. They were a precious support to prevent herself from becoming discouraged about wanting to help Duo.

"Asyut, um..."

Yuna looked directly into Asyut's eyes. And Asyut, upon receiving her gaze, looked back at her.

".....Yes?"

"I... think I understand a little more. What you meant about being unable to pardon Duo in your position. I said that when someone's life is concerned then one's position doesn't matter, but that was a one-sided opinion..... At first I thought it was strange when I saw you stifling yourself to death to be the "First Holy Knight". I wanted you to value yourself more. But, recently, I realized something during the Ceremony of Display. I realized that there really are people who rely on you and me. Asyut, you're working hard for those people, right?"

Asyut did not interject and listened to Yuna quietly.

“Now I understand a little bit about the responsibility the saint carries. I think I also understand a bit of what you wanted to say, Asyut..... and so I thought about different things on top of those.”

Yuna straightened her posture on the bed. And then, like that, lowered her head deeply.

“But I still won’t yield on wanting to save Duo. So, please, lend me your strength.”

“.....”

A gentle silence flowed.

Finally, by the time she felt like she was unable to endure that silence a second longer, Asyut opened his mouth.

“Before I answer, there is something I must talk to you about.”

Asyut’s words were neither an affirmative nor a refusal. Yuna raised her head, perplexed. What could he possibly want to talk about?

Yuna fell uneasily silent and Asyut draped his coat over her shoulders before sitting down in a chair beside her.

“First, even if I were to cooperate in Duo’s release, my influence alone is not enough to do this. This is because your influence is too strong, Lady Celiastina. It is absolute that those who defy you are immediately executed. To overturn that..... yes, you would need the cooperation of someone politically strong, like Lord Linus, or religiously strong, like Lady Yodel.”

“I’ll definitely do something about Linus. I’ll go and see him again and again until he lends his strength.”

We can put aside Lord Linus, Asyut seemed to imply as he shook his head.

“A problem is Lady Yodel.”

“Yodel? But Yodel herself is the one who is acting in order to save Duo. You should

know that, right?"

"Her objective is not Duo's release."

"Eh?"

"This incident was planned by Lady Yodel in order to destroy your authority. Lady Yodel was also the one to instigate Duo's attack on you."

"-!"

Yuna became speechless. He was talking about something she couldn't ever have imagined. Yodel spurred on Duo?

"T-That can't be true."

"It is not a lie. By having Duo executed, everyone's animosity towards you would be amplified. This applies to the signatures as well. It is just to stir up everyone's sympathy. She is predicting that, in any case, just the signatures alone will not be enough to revoke the execution."

"No.....!"

"That is how large Lady Yodel's resolution to oppose you is. Lady Yodel will do anything to have Duo executed. If he is not, then her plan will collapse and, above all, she will have given in to you."

Yuna shook her head harshly. No matter what he said, she couldn't believe it. Wasn't Yodel always wishing for everyone's happiness? -Yes, didn't Nasha talk about this? That Yodel was a wonderful person. That Yodel smiled gently at Nasha, who wished for everyone to become happy, and gave her the pendant. There was no way someone like that would sacrifice another person for the sake of her own goal.

"Lady Celiastina, please raise your head."

Asyut softly fixed the coat that was slipping from Yuna's shoulders as she looked down and gripped the sheets tightly.

"Lady Yodel's will has not changed from the past. Even now she is acting only with thoughts of the country in mind. It has simply shifted a little. The truth is that she

herself has realized that the path she is advancing on is separate from what she wished for originally– but she is no longer able to stop. I believe that fact is something she may be troubled over.”

“.....”

Yodel’s eyes came to Yuna’s mind. If those eyes were an indication of her will then it was extremely solid and unshakeable. Could a woman like her actually have doubts? Even though she seemed to be a woman who always plunged forward without hesitation.

“Also, there is another problem, not just Lady Yodel.”

Asyut pulled away and once again put distance between him and Yuna.

“Let us suppose, for argument’s sake, that Lord Linus, Lady Yodel, and I all moved towards the release of Duo. The moment it is done, the three of us will have publicly opposed you, Lady Celiastina. If we also have the signature list, then the popular will of the royal palace will also be added to our camp. In that situation, what do you think will happen in the end if Duo is released? –Everyone will be cognizant of how Saint Celiastina’s views can be bent.”

She knew immediately what Asyut wanted to say. Celiastina, who boasted absolute power, will have given in for the first time.

“The saint, who no one could stop until now, would have been stopped by the three of us gathering together. Furthermore, everyone will be given the impression that even servants, if they gather in a group, will be able to push the saint around. This will be an extremely great “fact” for those in the anti-saint faction. This may allow them to gain more momentum..... Now that I think about it, the influence on the anti-saint faction may have been less if Duo was released from the start by your final words.”

Certainly, what he said was true. However, the fact that Yuna did not release Duo with the saint’s authority was because it would incite Duo’s hatred towards her, rather than consideration of her influence on the anti-saint faction. Moreover–.

“That’s fine. It’s best that a saint doesn’t have absolute power, just because they’re a saint.”

Those words came out very naturally. Asyut lost his words and took a long hard look



at Yuna's face.

"In fact, it has not been necessary for a long time for the saint to have authority, wouldn't you say? -I'm sure the people in the past used to give the saint a degree of freedom, for dedicating their entire life for the sake of the country. However, that is different from letting people be hurt by selfish actions. It's best not to have power for that."

"That is..... true, but..."

Asyut, who was unable to pull himself out of his disorder, gave a vague response.

"But if you explicitly state that then the degree of danger that will befall your person will--"

"Certainly increase, right? But that can't be helped..... or something like that, though I know I'm not in the position to say that. However, I want to stop being a being of terror to everyone any more than this. If I don't then....."

She surely won't be able to return. Yuna added that in her heart.

Deep in her chest, the "other" feeling shook as if confused. It was a complicated emotion, as if it were angry, or as if it were being sullen without anger.

"I'm sorry for saying something selfish. But these are my thoughts."

Yuna apologized to "two people". Asyut was silent for a while, and his eyes dropped to his own hands which he lightly interlocked. But, before long, he raised his head slowly.

".....I understand."

Asyut took the list of signatures. And then, at the very last page, he signed his name in a flowing script and handed it back to Yuna.

"A-Asyut!"

"Then I will do as much as I can. I will try to persuade the others in order to release Duo."

"-Thank you!!"

Yuna was so pleased she was almost jumping in joy at how her words were finally heard.

However, Asyut, who was watching Yuna, gave a smile that was seemingly sad in some way.

†

Dinner was prepared out of consideration for Yuna's health and only things that were easy to digest were lined up. While quietly eating thick warm soup, something like comfort passed through her throat. But, even though she thought it was delicious, she couldn't bring herself to have an appetite. The other two or three items, she only ate one bite, and then left the rest.

After dinner she called Aeneas and the two of them went out. Originally, her bodyguard was Siecrest but she didn't think he would remain quiet and stand back at the place that she would have taken him to. On that point, she could relax if it was Aeneas. She was apologetic for taking up his precious free time but Aeneas didn't seem to care at all. Rather, he seemed happy to be relied on. Yuna secretly admired how he was chivalric through and through.

Before she talked to Yodel, she would like to secure one more ally. She wasn't going to be an opponent to Yodel if she was the only one making a fuss. But if Yodel knew that Asyut and Linus were looking to release Duo, then she too might agree.

Yuna came to Linus' personal rooms and took in a deep breath. And then she slowly exhaled. –What kind of eyes would Linus look at her with? When she thought about that, she couldn't help but be nervous; however, she suppressed her desire to run and stood in front of the door. She got Aeneas to wait here without entering.

And then she raised a hand – on the verge of shaking – and knocked reservedly but firmly.

“.....Who is it?”

Immediately, Linus' calm reply came back.

“It is Celiastina. May I enter?”

“Go ahead.”

Yuna cautiously opened the door. On the other side Linus was seated comfortably on a wide sofa and playing with a glass in his hand.

“You came. Has your health recovered?”

“Eh?”

“I heard that you collapsed. You must have accumulated a lot of stress. But that’s not unreasonable, huh.”

Yuna was lost at how to respond. She hadn’t thought she would receive these sympathetic words.

“Since you probably haven’t completely recovered, let us end this conversation quickly. Please, sit.”

Yuna did as she was told and sat down on the opposite sofa.

“Even though I treated you coldly like that, you still won’t give up, hm?”

“.....I will not give up. I understand that you do not accept or approve of my existence. But, right now, I wish for you to ignore that.”

“Did you speak to Lord Asyut?”

“Yes. He is going to aid me.”

Oh? Linus implied with an amused smile.

“-You know, I was thinking of helping you too.”

“R-Really?”

“Like I said when I told you my thoughts directly. Presently, Duo’s matter is not a problem to me and I don’t comprehend why you are that desperate. However, watching you move around is unexpectedly interesting. Even if your true colors were to be exposed, there would be no point to locking you up and confining you in your room at that time. If that’s the case, then it might be fine to let you do as you wish.”

Furthermore, Linus added as he tilted his glass. Was he drinking because his mood was good? But, whether he was drinking or not, his attitude didn't seem to change much.

"It is very interesting to see Asyut cooperating with you. It would be boring if I objected here..... Yes, I will do whatever I can for you."

Linus extended his empty hand out. It looked like he wanted Yuna to hand over the signature list she was holding. When she saw how she didn't need to explain what this list was, or how he didn't even ask, it looked like he understood the situation exactly.

"There is one thing you need to be aware of though."

".....Is it about Yodel?"

Linus, whose eyes had lowered, glanced up slightly at Yuna.

"You heard it from Asyut, huh. Well, in other words, exactly that. These signatures you collected will belong to me and Asyut. Looking at it, it appears that all of the people in the Order of Holy Knights have signed too. At this point, this list is no longer just scribbles but a "weapon" with more than enough effectiveness..... However, these signatures have been collected by you under a veil of secrecy, right, Celia?"

Yuna nodded.

"Officially, Lady Yodel is the one who is doing this petition. That is to say, even if this is a chance to release Duo, this achievement and everything else will be brought to Lady Yodel. Are you okay with that?"

It was similar to what Asyut said. These signatures will make the saint's authority wobble more and more. In exchange, Yodel would gain everyone's trust. –She didn't have any objections to that itself. But, how Yodel would act after gaining everyone's trust, was the only thing she was concerned about. Was what Asyut said really the truth? She didn't want Yodel to just do as she pleased and toy with all the trust that she gathered. She needed to ascertain Yodel's feelings on this matter.

".....Right now, I am only thinking about saving Duo, if possible."

"You are an unselfish human, hm. Strange."

Linus returned the list to Yuna with a somewhat astounded expression. And then, he suddenly stood up, as if remembering something.

“Ah, yes, Celia. I almost forgot but...”

What now? Yuna also stood up like him and watched him with a suspicious look. Linus walked up to her but she couldn't see his intentions.

“W-What?”

Bewildered, she was taken by the arms and drawn into him like that. In an instant, just as she had a thought, her forehead was kissed.

“-What are you doing!?”

She shook him off, flustered, and tried to take a step back but behind her was the sofa. And so she fell onto her rear like that.

“I promised, remember? If you used polite language towards me, I would kiss you once.”

No sooner than Linus declared that with a smile, Aeneas opened the door with great force and entered. He stood in the way between Yuna and Linus, as if he was breaking in, and quickly took Yuna's hands to pull her up.

“It appears that your business has already concluded. Lady Celiastina's health has not recovered yet, thus we will excuse ourselves here.”

“A-Aeneas.”

Because of Aeneas, Yuna was pushed out to the hallway before she could say anything. Linus' laughter fell onto their backs.

“I'll also be cheering you on, in a way. Good luck, Celia.”

# Chapter Ten

Yodel was the only remaining one.

Finally she attained Asyut and Linus' cooperation. She was scared to face Yodel for many reasons but there was no way she could run away at this point. Feelings of wanting to hurry and see her but also of wanting to let this pass by and not see her fought against each other inside of Yuna.

Asyut was the one to arrange a face-to-face meeting between her and Yodel. The meeting was inside the tower where Yodel lived, and it seemed like Asyut was going to guide her there. Her meeting was going to happen in a short time.

"Lady Celiastina, excuse my intrusion."

Yuna, who had been looking over the signature list on the sofa, raised her head at Nasha's voice. Nasha entered the room shyly while pulling a small cart along.

"Um, I am very sorry knowing that you just had breakfast but, if you do not mind, would you like to try this?"

What was revealed was a delicious-looking fruit mousse.

"To be honest, I know I am being audacious but, um, this was something I made together with a cook."

"You did, Nasha?"

"Yes. And because it came out like this, I thought that perhaps you would like to try it, Lady Celiastina."

That's right, lately, she hadn't been eating much. She was like that during today's breakfast too. No doubt Nasha, as a maid, was quite concerned about that.

"Ah, of course we also requested a taste test for poison! You don't need to force yourself to try it either. Um, it's only if you don't mind."

“Thank you for the dessert.”

Yuna took the spoon with a smile, and carried one scoop to her mouth. Just as it looked, the mousse gently melted in her mouth.

“It’s delicious. Nasha, you said you liked eating more than cooking, but you’re also skilled at cooking.”

“Y-You remember me saying that?”

Nasha’s face turned red as she shrunk her body.

“.....Um, Lady Celiastina.”

“Mm?”

“I have not passed over the signatures I collected earlier at the infirmary to you yet.”

“Ah, right. Now that you mention it, thank you for doing that. I was worrying about a lot of things but you saw that and really helped me out. I’m glad.”

“Oh no, you don’t have to thank me..... Related to that though, Mislee has the list for safekeeping in the infirmary. Will you be heading to the infirmary today? I believe she will be able to hand it over to you at that time.”

She sounded evasive somehow. Yuna was worried that there was something hard for Nasha to say. Come to think of it, so many things had happened lately that she hadn’t been able to make an appearance at the infirmary. Maybe what Nasha was trying to say was that it would be good for Yuna to try and go. She still had a little time before Asyut would show up.

“How about we try going right now? Are you okay for time, Nasha?”

“Y-Yes! Of course!”

As she thought, something was strange. Yuna stood up from her seat while thinking that things were odd.

The corridors that led to the infirmary were as quiet and calm as usual. The flowers in the courtyard swayed and rustled to the wind, and the trees that reached high in the sky and were basking in the sunlight cast shadows on the corridor. It was a view that she should have already been familiar with but– as Yuna got closer to the white building that was the infirmary she was surrounded by a faint out-of-place feeling.

The white door that was always firmly closed was open just a little bit.

And she could overhear laughter– it sounded like the voices of children? She was certain she could hear bright and playful voices screaming with delight.

(Huh?)

She stopped moving, bewildered. Inside her chest the “other” feeling was also confused. Nasha, who noticed Yuna’s pace slowing, gently took her hand.

“Lady Celiastina, let’s go over.”

As her hand was pulled and she started walking again, a child rushed out the infirmary’s door right at that moment. It was a girl around ten years of age. Following her was another girl around the same age.

“Wait! I was gonna do it!”

“Nu uh! It was a promise that I’d get to change the bandages this time!”

The two were playing around while being in high spirits.

As Yuna watched the scene in front of her with an open mouth, Mislee, the manager, soon appeared walking at a relaxed pace.

“Come now, don’t run around so much. There are many people who want their bandages changed, so you two don’t need to compete.”

Mislee’s warm smile never changed.

“–Oh my.”



It was when she successfully caught the two girls running around that Mislea noticed Yuna and Nasha. After her eyes opened widely in surprise, she gave them a gentle smile.

“Oh my, oh my, Lady Celiastina. You came today.”

“.....Good morning.”

The young girls who were clinging to Mislea looked up at Yuna with curious eyes. And when she noticed that and gave them a light smile, they hurried to hide behind Mislea. It looked like they were shy.

“Um, these children are...?”

“Ah, this long-haired one is Emili and the messy-haired one is Annie. These two have been assistant nurses in the infirmary since yesterday.”

“Assistants.....?”

“Yes, thanks to Lord Asyut’s consideration. There are other children inside as well. They’re all children of servants and those who were interested in this kind of care were called here. Now, let’s not stand around talking in this corridor, come inside. I will introduce the children inside.”

Urged by Mislea to go on and show Yuna in, the young girls timidly took Yuna’s hands. She still had a slightly surprised expression as her hands were pulled. Led by her small guides, Yuna passed through the infirmary doors.

–The atmosphere was completely different compared to a few days ago.

Yuna immediately felt this. However, it wasn’t just limited to the atmosphere, she could see that various changes had occurred. The patients, who just a few days ago avoided Yuna and had their sheets covering their heads, were sitting comfortably in bed, and there were many other children like Emili and Annie who were running around inside.

(It’s this different just from having children here.)

Asyut made a wonderful arrangement. The patients, who had been so stiff, were talking to the children with smiles. Watching this scene, Yuna felt the back of her eyes start to sting and warm.

The patients were taken aback and their eyes widened when they noticed Yuna standing straight at the entrance. Yuna flinched at their gathered looks but– in the next moment, the room overflowed with a warm applause. The moment Yuna realized that was directed at her, she became even more confused.

“Thank you, Lady Saint!”

A girl, who was around five or six years of age and especially energetic amongst the other children, said this in a loud voice. And then, following that, there were many “thank you”s given to Yuna. The patients, who in the past couldn’t look at her for even a moment, were welcoming her with applauses and calm smiles.

This... this was...

Yuna couldn’t believe this unexpected scene in front of her eyes, and so she ended up throwing a look at Mislee and Nasha. But the women only smiled and continued to clap without explaining. It was as if they were saying an explanation wasn’t needed– this entire scene spoke for itself.

“Here, Lady Saint! This is ours!”

The young girl handed over papers to Yuna. –There were a lot of signatures on them. Yuna took them, surprised, because they shouldn’t have known that she was the one collecting signatures.

“Hey, I did it without messing up! I did good, right? Right?”

As the applause slowly quieted down, the young girl who was the first to greet Yuna pulled at the sleeves of the adults around her. The girl was satisfied when everyone praised her, saying she did well and was amazing. And then a young man, around twenty-three or twenty-four years of age, picked her up saying “Come on, you’re not the star here!” and took her to a corner of the room hurriedly. Matching that were the resounding laughs of the patients.

“Well? Everyone has improved quite a lot.”

Mislee smiled widely.

“Ah..... yes.”

Yuna gave a small nod, not knowing what to say.

“I’m sorry, I told everyone that you were working hard on this movement, Lady Celiastina.”

“Eh?”

“The rumors about a beauty who was doing a petition reached even here. The rumors described you as a lady with a gentle expression, flowing golden hair, and purple eyes. –Everyone immediately knew that this was you, Lady Celiastina. And that’s why I didn’t hide it.”

Mislee and Nasha looked at each other and laughed mischievously. But Yuna wasn’t able to accept this situation so easily.

“But that’s... to be welcomed so warmly like this is.....”

She had thought about how nice it’d be to have this happen one day, but now when the spectacle was in front of her she was deeply embarrassed.

“What are you saying?”

Mislee interrupted Yuna in a bright voice. And then she looked over the room slowly, eyes crinkled. Yuna also followed her line of sight..... There were many empty beds. It seemed like the number of patients was half of what it was at the beginning.

“It is unfortunate but, certainly, not everyone was able to welcome you, Lady Celiastina. Because, as one would think, there are some who aren’t able to look at your face no matter what..... those people were allowed to leave and return to their own homes. But there are this many people who wanted to wait and welcome you for doing your utmost for Duo’s sake, Lady Celiastina. It’s a wonderful thing, isn’t it. Once again I’m reminded of just how strong and kind people can be. I’m deeply moved.”

Yuna looked over each person in the room, one by one, as if making sure. There were people who received her gaze but there were also people who averted their eyes, as if uncomfortable. It was natural that they couldn’t so easily forgive Celiastina’s actions. There was no way she thought that things would be forgiven and forgotten with just this matter of the signatures. She was sure that even now there were many people who were lost and unsure how to feel. But still, they were here in this place, greeting her, to cheer on the current her. For Yuna, that was more than enough. She had to

accept everyone's feelings firmly.

"Everyone, thank you so much."

She clenched her hands tightly around the signatures that were handed to her. It'll be okay, she would work hard. She would work hard to the very end. Meanwhile, the "other" feeling was still confused and sought help from Yuna. Don't worry, just accept everyone's feelings honestly like that. Even if she wasn't able to accept them immediately right now, Yuna was sure that a day would come when Celiastina would understand.

Before she knew it, at some point in time, Asyut was standing beside the door. He must have heard that Yuna came here and came to pick her up. Yuna wiped away the tears that had gathered in her eyes and then gave Asyut a nod. Let's go, to where Yodel was.

"Lady Celiastina."

Nasha rushed over and gently gripped Yuna's hand. In that instance, she handed something over.

"Please tell Lady Yodel that 'I've come this far without forgetting your words for even a moment'. And that- 'if it's Lady Celiastina, I am sure she will be able to support your beliefs together with you, Lady Yodel'."

Yuna opened up her hand. And what was revealed there, on her palm, was the purple pendant.

†

Where Yodel normally spent her time was on the uppermost floor of a tall tower called the Priest Tower, where priests and priestesses lived en masse. The soaring austere tower was the highlight of the royal palace's northeast side. Its outer walls were painted white with countless of windows penetrating through it. There weren't many decorative decorations and it was the tower's existence itself that awed its surroundings. Flagstones extended directly from the entrance and on both sides blue plants called plica gathered.

Yodel was a member of the priest family that sat on the highest position in the country. It was said that women were particularly powerful in that family. Yodel's mother and

grandmother were already dead and so it was natural that she became the leader of that family. She was still young and the weight on those shoulders must be considerable. And that might be why she couldn't forgive Celiastina for disturbing the country excessively.

Of course the inside of the tower was refined. Ordinary priests wore black robes; they shone well against the white of the building and Yuna followed their movements with her eyes.

It seemed like they used a spiral staircase that was set alongside the wall to reach the upper floors. Yuna was dumbfounded at how they had to take quite a roundabout way in order to reach the upper floors. It would be fine once in a while, but it would be hard coming and going every day.

"I believe the stairs represent the thought that the path to become close to God is not easy. Furthermore, higher ranking priests do not leave this tower often and so I do not think it would be a problem for them."

Asyut gave her a supplement. Ah, it was true that being able to exit and enter easily wouldn't allow them to retain their dignity, and it didn't seem good to have many interactions with the outside world. Then, was it unusual for someone to proactively move around like Yodel? She probably couldn't concern herself with appearances and stay still and secluded in the tower while Celiastina was throwing the royal palace out of order.

"Lord Asyut, Lady Celiastina, we have been awaiting you."

It was a man of around fifty years of age, and a finely kept grey beard, who greeted Yuna and Asyut.

"Lady Yodel is at the shrine inside the tower. I will guide you there."

Lowering his head respectfully, he then turned calmly on his heel and started walking. As he started up the spiral staircase without even waiting for a response, Yuna hurried after him. She quietly told Asyut that she was going now. Asyut nodded in response but seemed somewhat worried. From here on, she would have to depend on herself. Yuna made a fist and psyched herself up.

"This way."

They continued down a corridor from the third floor landing. There were many doors to their left and right, but she was guided to a large door at the end. It was a large double door. It exuded the atmosphere of this being a very special room. Was this the shrine? A shrine was a more personal small room for offering up prayers to God compared to a church. It seemed this place was an especially holy place even in the tower.

The man, who was her guide, withdrew at this point. Yuna opened her mouth at the back of his figure to stop him from leaving but in the end she didn't and, after a moment's hesitation, she knocked..... the sound was absorbed by the door. It must have been because the door was quite thick, and so the sound of her dull knock didn't resound. Yuna slowly opened the door.

Inside, Yodel was kneeling in front of an altar and praying to God. At that moment, she had her back to Yuna and so her expression could not be seen. The hem of her purple robes were spread across the white floor, and it felt like an uncrossable boundary. There were detailed sculptures gathered on the altar and, because of those, the shrine was surrounded by an overwhelming presence that also seemed to swallow Yodel.

“.....”

Yuna stood silently at the entrance but it was only for a short time before Yodel soon stood up and turned in her direction.

“I have kept you waiting.”

It was a voice without inflection. And so it made Yuna all the more nervous. It reminded her of the calm before storms.

“You said you had something important to discuss with me?”

Yodel slowly walked closer.

“.....ah.”

Yuna was at a loss. Words wouldn't come. If she said anything, wouldn't she just be curtly refused? That faint heart stole Yuna's voice.

“.....It is about the imprisoned Duo, is it not?”

Yodel cut into Yuna, who was standing still.

“It is about the matter of being opposed to Duo’s execution.”

Yuna nodded while looking at Yodel’s eyes. And then she timidly opened her mouth, as if pulled by Yodel.

“I want to call off Duo’s execution. For that sake, I need your help, Yodel.”

“My help?”

“Yes. Duo strongly resists being released by me. So, I thought that rather than by me Duo needs to be helped by the support of everyone around him. I wish to ask for the cooperation of people with influence, like you, Yodel.”

Yodel stared at Yuna, as if appraising her.

“Are you serious about those thoughts? If so, then have you not mistaken who you’ve come to for your request?”

“I have also requested Asyut and Linus’ cooperation. The two said they would lend me their strength. Others, such as the captain of the Order of Holy Knights and the vice-captain, and many others, have acted. But without Yodel’s cooperation then it’ll be difficult.”

“I am not speaking about that.”

In a quiet voice Yodel interrupted Yuna.

“Were you not told by Lord Asyut? About what I did this time.”

Yodel’s gaze slipped to the side. That look seemed to be reproaching Asyut, who wasn’t currently here.

“.....”

“It’s true... what Lord Asyut said.”

As if she was asked again, Yodel said this without hesitation.

“It is likely Lord Asyut speaks nothing but the truth. Everything you have heard is the truth. I sacrificed Duo for the sake of my own goals.”

What was said clearly from Yodel’s mouth was a great shock to Yuna. She certainly didn’t think that Asyut would lie, but there was still a part of her that didn’t want to accept the truth that Yodel treated people like pawns.

“Do you want my cooperation that much to save Duo? There is a limit to idiocy. I am the one who forced Duo to be executed. And that will soon be realized, therefore there is no way I would act to save him at this point, no?”

“But, Yodel, what you’re discarding is a person’s life.”

“–You’re the only one I don’t want to hear that from!”

Yodel, who had no expression, showed a hint of anger for the first time.

“No matter who else criticizes me, you are the only one I do not want to hear that from.”

“But, Yodel, you yourself know this, right? Don’t you think that it’s strange? You must be thinking that you don’t want Duo to die.”

“I do not think that it is strange. I will never step back. I will have Duo die.”

“Why go that far!?”

“There is no choice because no one else is doing anything. No one else is trying to stop you seriously. In the end, it became something this long. If the situation is left like this then soon, not just the royal palace, but the entire country will fall into ruin, for you alone. If that is the case then I have to cut off that negative flow.”

Lord Asyut is also a selfish person, Yodel threw out.

“He said to me that he wanted me to be a person who extended her hand to those who were weak. Even though he should know full well how bad things have become. To leave Saint Celiastina alone and simply extend my hand to those who are weak... the number would be endless. No matter how many hands I had, it would not be enough. To think that he is disillusioned with me, who is acting, when he himself didn’t break down that situation.”



Yodel, who said that, looked like she was terribly hurt. Yuna was unable to bear that.

“I thought that Lord Asyut was a person who was very close to me. I arbitrarily thought that we were quite similar. But it appears that I was mistaken. He easily forgave you.”

That’s wrong, Yuna shook her head. Asyut didn’t forgive the saint. And that’s why when he said he would lend his strength he had a sad and helpless smile. She was sure the hate towards the saint that Asyut had was still firmly rooted inside him.

“Asyut didn’t lend his strength for my sake. The one Asyut wants to save isn’t me but Duo. And surely you as well, Yodel.”

Yodel glared at Yuna.

“Asyut said this. That you yourself are at a loss about the path that you aimed for and the different place you’re heading towards. I’m sure that Asyut wants you to stop just this once, Yodel. I believe you can still turn back now.”

“Don’t speak as if you know everything! You and Lord Asyut, no one knows what I’m thinking. Don’t assume things and push them onto me.”

Yodel flapped the hem of her robes like she was shaking off Yuna’s words and then turned to grip the altar, as if she were leaning against it.

“.....Yodel.”

Yuna took a step towards Yodel, who had her back to Yuna.

“Please do not raise everyone’s feelings with anger by executing Duo. If Duo is saved then everyone will surely have hope that their voices can be a driving force to move the saint. Hope is better than anger, right?..... Yodel, you were the one who started collecting everyone’s signatures, weren’t you?”

“.....There aren’t that many signatures that were collected and, from the start, I did not call out to anyone prominent. To me, the signatures were nothing more than a prop to have the servants of the royal palace “participate” in the execution this time.”

“Yodel!”

Yuna drew near Yodel and turned her around forcibly. She pushed the list she was

holding into the hands of a surprised Yodel.

“Look at that.”

“This is.....”

It seemed like Yodel recognized immediately that this was a mountain of signatures. She flipped through the pages, silent.

“Those are the signatures gathered from everyone. This many were gathered. Of course, the name of the saint isn’t written. Everyone signed like this because they heard that they would be supporting Yodel’s movement. Even people who are scared of punishment from me signed, knowing that you would be their ally. So many people want to save Duo– and trust in you, Yodel.”

Yodel dropped the list. And the dry sound of the papers striking the ground broke in between Yodel and Yuna. And then Yodel picked up the list immediately. It must have been an unconscious action.

“Please, Yodel. Please save Duo. I’m begging you.....”

“I CANNOT!”

Yodel shouted. That bitter voice seemed to be something to sever the hesitation inside of herself.

“I am not wrong. My conviction of making this country better has not changed, now and in the past. I came all this way, always for that sake! People who must think about the development of this whole country cannot be caught up in every small event before their eyes!”

“You haven’t changed, now and in the past? Is that true? Have you really thought like this in the past?”

“–BE QUIET!”

A sharp sound echoed through the shrine.

Silence. For an instant, Yuna and Yodel were shocked. Both of them had no idea what happened right now. After that, Yuna felt her left cheek gradually turn hot.

“Ah.....”

Even Yodel seemed surprised at herself for raising a hand to Yuna. When Yuna turned to look at Yodel again, Yodel’s body stiffened slightly.

Yuna silently took out the handkerchief that was concealed in her dress’ pocket. Yodel was also quiet as she watched that action. When the folded handkerchief was slowly opened, a beautiful pendant with a purple jewel was revealed.

“Yodel, do you remember this?”

“.....”

When it was held out, Yodel took it with a sluggish action.

“.....Why do you have this.”

“So you remember it.”

Yuna was somewhat relieved. Yodel hadn’t forgotten. She remembered.

“The girl that you gave this to a long time ago is my maid right now.”

“.....”

“Her name is Nasha. She’s always respected you since she met you a long time ago at that church and exchanged words with you. She told me happily about that time. Of course, Nasha adores you even now. Knowing that I was going to meet you today, she lent me this pendant. And she wanted me to tell you that she’s come this far without forgetting your words for even a moment.”

“.....”

“Yodel, do you remember the reason you gave this pendant to Nasha at that time in the church? You asked Nasha why she came to the church everyday. Nasha answered that she wished for her friends, strangers, and everyone to live happily. You said– “Don’t ever forget those kind feelings” in response.”

“Stop..... stop!!”

Yodel held her head with both hands and staggered.

“I’m sorry for doing things this way. But aren’t you lying to yourself, Yodel? I also think that you definitely haven’t changed from the past and now, Yodel. And that’s why you’re actually hurting from doing things like sacrificing Duo. And yet, because you think releasing Duo means yielding to me, you aren’t able to release Duo.”

“That’s not it.....”

“From the beginning, I haven’t thought about winning against you, Yodel. I haven’t thought about wanting to win either. The important thing isn’t winning or losing. It’s not about who’s right or wrong either. Surely what’s important is what you yourself believe in. And that’s why I want to learn through watching your beliefs and the strength that has always supported those. After all, I’m really weak. I’m instantly washed away by the situation and I will want to give up. Before I know it, I start to think only about getting people to help me. It’s really pathetic.”

It was only recently that she noticed that it wasn’t good to do that.

“At last, I’ve started to see a little of what I want to do and what I should be doing. When I think about the future, I think about how I might be able to open a slightly different world if I had the strength like you, Yodel.”

A different world for Celiastina too.

“That’s why I want you, Yodel, to walk the path that you truly believe in.”

“Please... stop...”

Saying that, Yodel turned her face away. Once again she faced the altar and fell silent. Her elegant robes, which had previously seemed like a symbol of Yodel’s confidence, now looked like a lump of loneliness and confusion that hung over her back.

“.....Yodel.”

Even though she called out, Yodel didn’t respond anymore.

“I’m... going now, okay?..... I’ll leave those signatures with you, Yodel.”

With her hand on the shrine’s door, Yuna turned back once more. In the breathtakingly

solemn room, Yodel's small back looked terribly helpless. In reality Yodel wasn't a superhuman, she was just a young girl.

“.....”

Yuna closed the door gently.

In the middle of descending the long spiral staircase, she noticed Asyut waiting at the entrance to the tower.

Asyut showed a relieved expression when he recognized Yuna's form. Could it be that he had continued to wait? When Asyut noticed Yuna quickening her pace, he slowly walked towards her.

Looking up at Asyut who stopped in front of her, she felt like her feelings – which had been drawn tight – finally loosen. Yuna gave a slight smile and murmured, thank you.

# Chapter Eleven

This was Asyut's first time going to this jail.

Originally, this place was nothing more than a temporary detention facility for those who caused trouble in the royal palace. Normally it was a forgotten space where no one entered or exited. Even when there was the occasional imprisoned person, they would be properly transferred within a few days. Duo was probably the first person to have stayed in this jail for several weeks.

And that Duo... what was his emotional state as time passed?

When he thought about that, Asyut felt like he could understand a little bit of the emotional whirlpool in Duo. The sorrow of losing a loved one, and the pain of being unable to save them. No, it was surely more than that– it must have been a deep and violent feeling of self-condemnation that tormented him, as if he had done it with his own hands. He must be thinking he could never get up again–.

(Duo also hasn't thought about wanting to be saved, huh.)

People have said that because there are people who wanted to live more but couldn't, one mustn't treat their lives poorly. That living itself was something to be rejoiced. But those words only suited one's own convenience. Why did they not think about the suffering of those people who want to die but can't? Why did they have to compare themselves with people who stood in exact opposite positions? It was not always possible for people who were facing the past and forced to face the future to take one step forward.

There was almost no possibility for someone, who was hurt in the heart enough to wish for death, to find hope in themselves. If such a person were able to stand up again.....

Stepping off the stairs that went below ground, Asyut looked over the prison. A long and narrow corridor continued to the back. At a high location, there was a window where light shone in, and the air was clearer than he expected.

He heard that Duo was in the furthest back room. But he couldn't hardly feel the

presence of a person. That wasn't only because Duo didn't stir an inch, but because he had parted with his life. His heart was on the brink of death. Asyut walked down the passage with a steady gait.

".....Duo."

Immediately arriving at the room in the back, Duo was crouched down with his head hanging. He was holding his knees and there wasn't the slightest movement. Compared to the day when he attacked the saint, his body seemed a size smaller.

"I came to release you. -Today, at this time, you are a free man."

Duo gave no response. He did not even lift his head.

".....Do you not want to leave from there?"

Asyut's calm voice did not break.

"Are you going to rot away like that?"

It wasn't his intention to extend a helping hand. But it also wasn't his intention to forsake Duo.

"Is it your wish to die there, doing nothing, just continuing to sit there?"

".....Shut up."

Duo's voice was small.

"I have to ask about what you want to do."

"You already know. I want Celiastina's death. My only wish is my revenge on that person."

"Are you still saying that?"

"What did you say.....!"

Asyut shook his head unhurriedly.

“Laying your hands on Lady Celiastina is no longer possible. First, you need to accept that. What I am asking about is after that fact. Knowing now that your revenge on Lady Celiastina is impossible, what do you want to do? Do you want to die? Or do you want to live? If you want to die, what would it be for?”

“.....I-!”

“If you are going to follow your late wife, do you think your wife would be happy about that?”

“SHUT UP! That way of talking pisses me off the most! What do you know!? After all, you’re on Celiastina’s side. Don’t give me lip service, pretending you know everything, when you grew up comfortably as a pampered child!”

Duo raised his head for the first time and snarled violently at Asyut. Seeing that, Asyut narrowed his eyes slightly.

“Everyone has their own pain. If you think you’re the only one who is unhappy, then that would be called pretending to know everything.”

“Bastard!”

“How many people do you think die by the day. Hundreds and thousands of people are lost every day. And each time that happens there are many who grieve over that person’s “death”.”

“Are you trying to say that Rin and I were nothing more than one of those?”

“Yes.”

The furious shaking of the jail bars resounded through the entire jail.

“-!”

“This is repeated every day. The sorrow of losing someone. Nevertheless, most people continue on every day as usual. Why do you think that is? Is it because their sadness was not that deep? That’s not it. –It’s because they have other precious things they must protect.”

The reason he was able to stand up again was because he was able to realize that.



“Do you not have anything else? If you say you don’t, are you not just convincing yourself of that? You might say that your wife, Rin, was everything to you, but isn’t there something else – even just a few – that are important to you? Will you really be content to avert your eyes from that, listen to the voice of death from inside you, and end your life?”

Gugh, Duo bit his lip.

“If you had become alone in this world, then at that time you would not be the slightest bit afraid of losing your life. But right now you are not alone. You still..... cannot die yet, right? Even though it may hurt.”

“I...”

Duo’s voice was frail.

“I can’t live if I’ve lost Rin.”

There was a little hesitation included in that answer.

“Duo, do you know about the petition that went through the entire royal palace on your behalf?”

“.....”

“At the end, about eighty percent of the signatures collected were from servants in the same position as you. Undoubtedly, not all of the people who signed were serious about wanting to save you. Amongst them, there might have been those who signed because they followed the flow of people around them, or those who had no choice but to follow their boss and sign. But I am sure there are those who signed wishing to save you, even if they had to exchange their life for yours.”

Asyut took out a folded paper from his breast pocket. He spread it open carefully and then handed it to Duo.

“In there is your mother’s signature. That the letters are horribly shaky is because it was a strong wish for this signature to save you.”

“-guh!”

A sobbing sound resounded through the bars. Asyut gently closed his eyes.

“It’s true... that I still... have my family and friends. But...”

“You can’t forgive yourself for being the only one saved.”

“That’s right... I can’t forgive that. Me... being the only...”

It was an excessively pained murmur.

“.....Certainly, your wife was not saved. And there are many others whose lives were stolen unreasonably. But is that not exactly why the success of this time and the feelings of those people who signed are so precious? Are you fine with crushing that yourself?”

“I don’t want to justify my survival with that.”

“That’s true. The thought that you were the only one saved will surely torment you for a long time. Even the existence of those who care for you might feel like a burden for a while. However–“

Asyut’s words broke off.

“In time, there will surely come a day when that becomes your support.”

A silence spread. Only Duo’s sobbing voice echoed quietly. Asyut didn’t say anything more; he remained silent and watched over Duo.

And then.

“I want you to tell... Celiastina something.”

Duo muttered bit by bit.

“That she needs to always remember Rin. And that she’ll never allow the same thing to repeat again.”

Asyut gave a firm nod.

The path ahead would surely be tough and painful. He knew that himself. But, some

day when that was overcome, there would be something stretching beyond that which would move his heart– that is what he also hoped for.

And then, on this day, Duo was released after this period of a few weeks.

†

Duo, who stood under the sun for the first time in a long while, squinted his eyes at its radiance. He was welcomed by cheers of joy from many people. Most likely his family, friends– and strangers who joined the petition. Because of many girls, there were petals of blessing scattered brilliantly all around and the place was wrapped in a festive atmosphere.

Alone, Yuna watched that from a distance.

In the end, Yodel lent her strength. And then, as if that opened the lid, it was almost an unanimous decision to release Duo. There was no room for Saint Celiastina to object, and it was as if her power this time had been meaningless– at least that’s what it looked like publicly.

Yuna thought that was good.

Leaving that place, it was when she came to a corridor that didn’t have much traffic, that Nasha came running over. And then she grabbed Yuna’s hands with excitement.

“Lady Celiastina! Finally, Duo has been released! Congratulations! You worked so hard!”

“Mm. Thank you, Nasha.”

“Also, thank you very much for this.”

Rummaging through her pockets, she pulled out that pendant.

“Lady Yodel returned this to me this morning.”

“Yodel?”

“Yes! Lady Celiastina, you spoke to Lady Yodel about me, didn’t you. For some reason she thanked me.”

“I see.”

“Although, she seemed a bit tired. Maybe Lady Yodel has also been troubled over various things.”

“.....You may be right, but if it’s Yodel then she’ll definitely be okay.”

As Yuna nodded, a distant human shape rushed over. Watching, she wondered who it was, only to see that the shape that was gradually growing larger was Aeneas.

“– Lady Celiastina!”

“What’s the matter, Aeneas?”

“I’m glad that you aren’t anywhere near that crowd of people. Are you going somewhere alone? Please allow me to accompany you.”

“Eh, um, yes. But I’ll be fine.”

Yuna’s words were vague. It was Linus’ order that had her being together with Aeneas until Duo was released, but it hadn’t been her intention to take him along everywhere until it was all over. She had taken advantage of his kindness and took him to various places but he was not yet officially Yuna’s bodyguard.

That thought must have appeared on her face because Aeneas’ expression clouded over.

“.....Lady Celiastina, could it be that I am a bother? If you do not wish for me to be your bodyguard then–“

“N-No, that’s not it! I feel very safe when you’re with me, Aeneas.”

Shaking her head hurriedly, she gave him her brightest smile. At Yuna’s smile, Aeneas turned red before their eyes. Oh my, oh my, Nasha murmured quietly as she watched these event on the side.

“? What’s wrong, Aeneas?”

“N-Nothing. I apologize.”

“Okay, well, I’m going to take a short walk around that area and then go back. I’d like to walk alone once in a while. But I’ll definitely return before the sun goes down.”

“By that area..... where do you mean?”

Aeneas, who didn’t seem to want Yuna to walk alone, continued to press.

“I’ll be fine, it’ll be close like the courtyard in the royal palace. I won’t go far.”

Aeneas finally withdrew when she smiled wryly and waved her hand. Nasha was smiling as she watched them.

As she started walking, Yuna murmured in her heart the words she wasn’t able to say.

–In truth, she wanted to go and see Asyut.

She wanted to say her thanks again to Asyut, who had moved in various ways in order to have Duo released this time, now that they achieved their goal. Moreover, he must still have ill feelings towards Celiastina inside of him. When she thought about how he crushed that to cooperate with her, Yuna was worried about his own feelings.

However, on the other hand, it was this reason that made her feel awkward about going to Asyut. He wouldn’t want to see her.

(I know that but...)

While that may be true, it wasn’t so easy to come to a clean decision.

(.....I wonder what happened between Asyut and Celiastina.)

Suddenly, a throbbing pain appeared deep in her chest. It was the feelings of the “other”.

Come to think of it, she spent all this time without knowing anything crucial. Why did Celiastina become a cruel saint? And why did she commit suicide? What was the pain that Asyut received from her?

(I want to know about more things. But what can I do when I know about them. I might just hurt Asyut even more.)

She's sure she already hurt him though. Not Celiastina, but Yuna herself.

She called to mind the desolate smile that Asyut gave the other day. When she remembered that smile, she wanted to cry a lot.

At that moment, as if in consideration for Yuna, a gentle smell softly tickled her nose.

".....wow!"

When she noticed it, Yuna arrived at the entrance to a flower garden that was in full bloom all over the area. How did she walk to this place? She separated from Aeneas and Nasha, followed the path for a while, and then passed a courtyard with a fountain—  
.

But that soon didn't matter anymore. Red, white, yellow, bluish-purple— it was a flood of unbelievably brilliant colors. The flowers that swayed in the gentle blowing wind looked very happy. And, as if they wanted to share that happiness with her as well, they softly brushed against her feet.

"Pretty—"

The only words that came out were that.

But it didn't need any more words than that.

She wanted to stop here forever. Until the sun rises, sinks, and the moon rises, and sinks. Until that repeated ten thousand times. She wanted to stay like this forever.....

Yuna walked into the flower garden. It was a landscape that didn't end no matter how much she continued forward. Soon, she couldn't bear it, and started running. Her breath rose. Yuna's chest filled with the air containing the life of the sweet flowers. And then, as if she were drawn in by the brightly colored flowers, Yuna dropped down. There was barely any impact, the soft ground having enveloped Yuna. Stretching out, she twisted her body a little and faced the sky. The flowers tickled her cheeks as the blue sky spread out before her eyes.

"Feels nice."

Exhaling a breath, Yuna slowly raised her upper body. And then she closed her eyes, and left herself to the blowing wind for a long time.

And then–.

“Lady Celiastina.”

A quiet and calm voice fell upon her back. When she looked back slowly, there stood a very familiar young man.

“Asyut.”

“So you were in a place like this.”

Asyut came to Yuna’s side with a well-regulated pace. Because he extended his hand very naturally, Yuna grasped that hand and stood up. Asyut’s hand was large and warm.

For some reason, when she faced Asyut again, her chest tightened.

“Asyut, um.....”

There were so many things she wanted to say and ask. But Yuna couldn’t say a single word. She had so many thoughts she didn’t know where she should start talking. And how would she say it so that she could convey everything–.

When she squeezed the hand that she was still holding, Asyut’s eyes widened slightly, and then he gave a smile that seemed to have a shadow.

Please don’t make that face. She didn’t want to cause him to make such a face.

But she didn’t know what to do.

“Lady Celiastina, please watch your step.”

“Eh? –kyah!”

When she looked down at her feet, following Asyut’s eyes which had dropped, a small black lump was crawling around. Yuna pulled her foot away at once.

“A p-poison bug!”

They were even here. Yuna clung to Asyut and then looked up at him immediately.

“Are you going to kill it?”

It wasn't the first thing she should have said. But the first thing that came to mind was that scene of the soldiers easily crushing the poisonous bug underfoot in the room of worship. All this time it had continued to be stuck in the back of her mind strongly.

Asyut, who received Yuna's question, shook his head relaxedly. There is no need, he answered in a calm voice.

“If we leave it alone it will surely go somewhere else.”

“But..... isn't it dangerous?”

“This isn't a poisonous insect. It resembles one, but it's a completely different species.”

“A different one?”

It was such a surprising answer that Yuna's voice went high.

“Yes, these are called torch bugs. When they become adults, they become beautiful and light up and glow in the night. Apparently, when they are still larvae, they cover themselves in a shell that looks like a poisonous insect in order to protect themselves.”

“This bug.....”

Yuna looked down again at the black bug by her feet. She could only see it as a gross bug, unrelated to words like beautiful or pretty. But wasn't that nothing more than a false covering it wore just for this season?

“The season has already passed this year for them to become adults, but I believe during their peak season this flower garden will become a wondrous view with many dancing lights. If it pleases you, would you like to come here next year?”

Next year.

Yuna reflected upon those words. It was right around that time, when those lights would be dancing, that she would disappear. At that time, she might not even be in this world any more.

Yuna closed her eyes.



Underneath a whole sky full of stars that seemed to fall and fall. Many dim lights would glow indistinctly in the dark. One, two, three– an amount that she couldn't count. And standing in the middle of that, if she was able to spend it together with Asyut like this right now...

“.....Mm, yes. If I can come back, that'd be nice.”

Opening her eyes again, she looked up at Asyut and smiled widely. Yuna realized all over again how much of a priceless miracle this was to be beside Asyut right now like this.

Asyut stared at that Yuna.

“Ah, that's right. Asyut, I'm happy you came all the way here for me. Thank you very much.”

Eventually Asyut gave a slow nod and returned a similar smile.

“Wherever you are, I will always come for you.”

A great wind blew through–.

The petals that danced in the wind glimmered brilliantly under the sunlight.

Unnoticed, the torch bug had disappeared.

# Afterword

“First of all, before anything else, I’d like to thank everyone who bought this book! Thank you very much!

I believe there are many who know this but this work is a series on my website [T/N: oops, thanks to Kukkiriri, she means libera], in other words a “net novel” that became a book. It’s a story about... a very normal girl who is suddenly summoned to the royal palace, completely confused about her surroundings, and slowly deepens her bonds with the people around her.

Written like that, I think there are many who will feel that it is a female-oriented fantasy, a royal story. Actually, I think so too. But that wouldn’t be so bad, is kind of what I thought (not that anyone asked lol).

Originally, the story I wanted to write was exactly that kind of royal story though. To be exact, a story that was slightly off from a royal one, maybe. Looking back again, I feel like I’m writing the story I wanted to read when I was in elementary and middle school.

Nonetheless, this “Light Beyond”, this series was written at first with a pretty loose stance. I thought on how it’s not good to have few works when you go onto my website. So, let’s make something! And that “something” was this work. I didn’t think any further than that. The thing that I did think about a little later was that, because it was going to be seen by someone, I should write an enjoyable story that was comedic and with lots of hot men... I only thought around this much.

But when I started writing, the story spread out more than I thought and even I was surprised. The heroine, Yuna, was more sincere and serious and perseverant than I planned, so I had to think a lot of things over again, and then finally settled down and concentrated. Once that happened, it gradually became a serious story, and couldn’t be stopped. Where did the comedy and lots of hot men go.....? I confess that this was a story that was started without a decided ending, but right now I’ve firmly accepted an ending. Nothing would make me happier then everyone continuing to watch over Yuna and the others and where they are heading.

I am truly indebted to Mr. Y for being in charge and changing this work into a book. Until it was published (surely) not only did he work so hard his life was shortened, but he was always cheerful and pleasant at any time. How encouraging that was every day! I'm grateful from the bottom of my heart.

I'm also very thankful to Mr. Kishida Mel, who is in charge of the illustrations. These illustrations that inflate the world of "Light Beyond" many times over are wonderful (I don't have any more words), and I'm confident I could stare at them for an entire day. It's truly been a long time since I cried when looking at a picture.

I would also like to thank all the people involved in the publication. The people who went onto my website and encouraged me. And, of course, the people who are reading this work right now! Again, I feel like I am being supported by many people!

Well then, I hope that there will be another chance to meet everyone again.

2008 February"

# Character Page



**Linus**

王宮で働いていた元料理人。シェリアスティーナに対する怒りは並々ならぬものがある。

**Yodel**

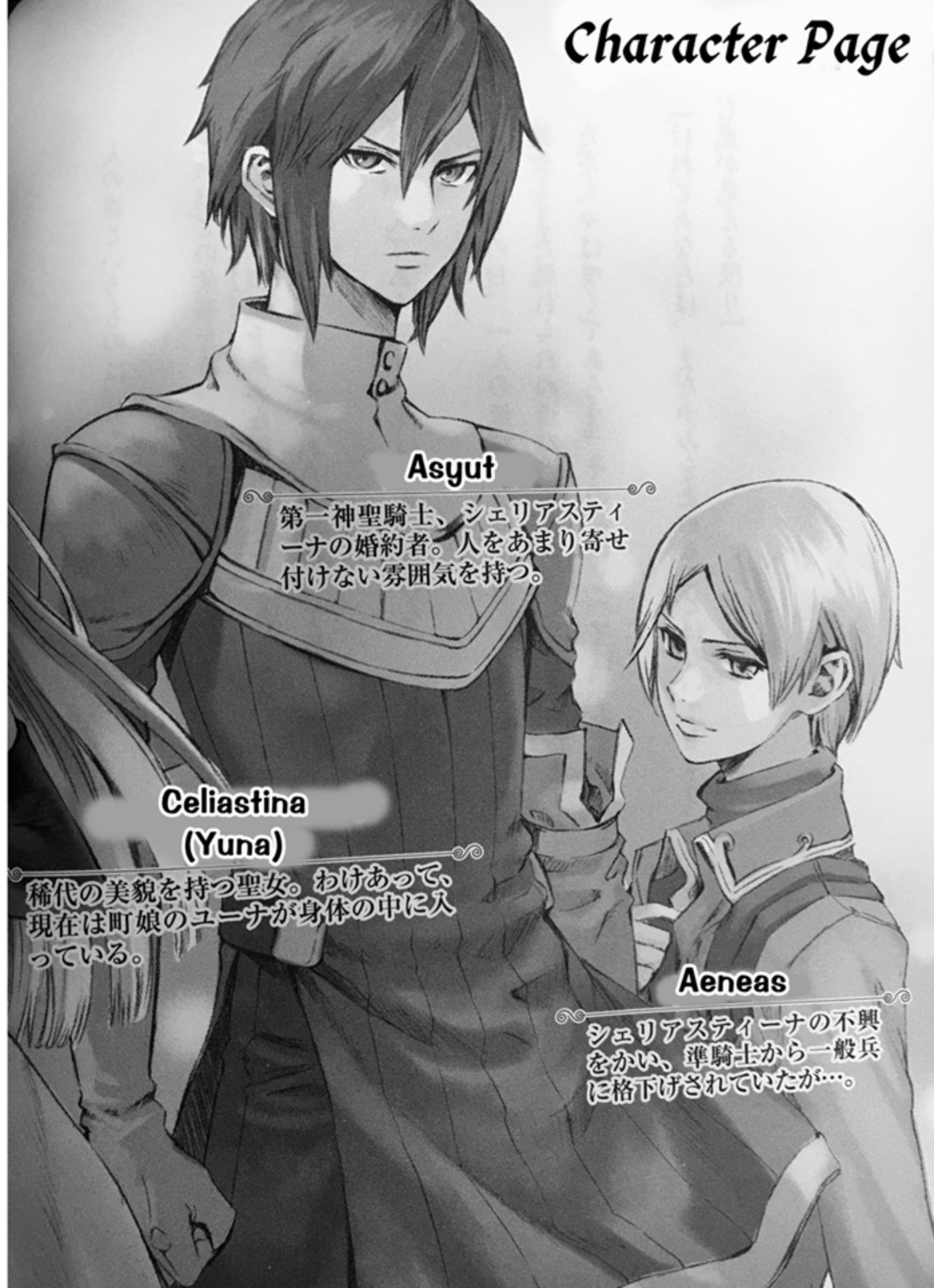
王宮に仕える女神官。シェリアスティーナを心底嫌っている。

**Siegcrest**

神聖騎士団副長。目の覚めるような金髪に長身。派手であっけらかんとした性格。

**Duo**

宰相補佐にしてシェリアスティーナの後見人。穏やかな外見に騙されがちだが、実は底意地が悪い…？



**Asyut**

第一神聖騎士、シェリアスティーナの婚約者。人をあまり寄せ付けない雰囲気を持つ。

**Celiastina  
(Yuna)**

稀代の美貌を持つ聖女。わけあって、現在は町娘のユーナが身体の中に入っている。

**Aeneas**

シェリアスティーナの不興をかい、準騎士から一般兵に格下げされていたが…。

### **Celiastina (Yuna)** [シェリアスティーナ (ユーナ) ]

An uncommonly beautiful saint. For some reason, Yuna – a village girl – is currently in this body.

### **Asyut** [アシュート]

The First Holy Knight and Celiastina's fiancé. He has an air to him that makes it hard for anyone to approach him.

### **Aeneas** [イーニ阿斯]

As a result of Celiastina's displeasure, he was demoted from a squire to an ordinary soldier.

### **Linus** [ライナス]

An advisor to the prime minister and Celiastina's guardian. He has a gentle outward appearance that is liable to trick people, but in reality he's playfully malicious at heart.....?

### **Siegcrest** [ジークレスト]

The vice-captain of the Order of Holy Knights, tall and with striking gold hair. He is flashy and acts as though he has nothing at all to do with whatever is going on.

### **Yodel** [ヨデル]

A priestess who serves the royal palace. She hates Celiastina from the bottom of her heart.

### **Duo** [デュオ]

A former cook who worked in the royal palace. He has extraordinary anger towards Celiastina.



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